

A person wearing a black corset and a blue skirt is sitting on the ground, holding a red apple in their hands. The background is a blurred forest floor with brown leaves.

SNOW WHITE

Istoire Awakens Book IV

Rebecca Fittery

Snow White

A Retelling of Little Snow White

Rebecca Fittery

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To my sister-in-law, Beth. Thanks for always being up for an adventure—whether in the real world, or in the worlds in my head. You're a treasure.

And to my brand-new nephew, Archie—thanks for staying put long enough to let your mom give me feedback on my book. Such a team player!

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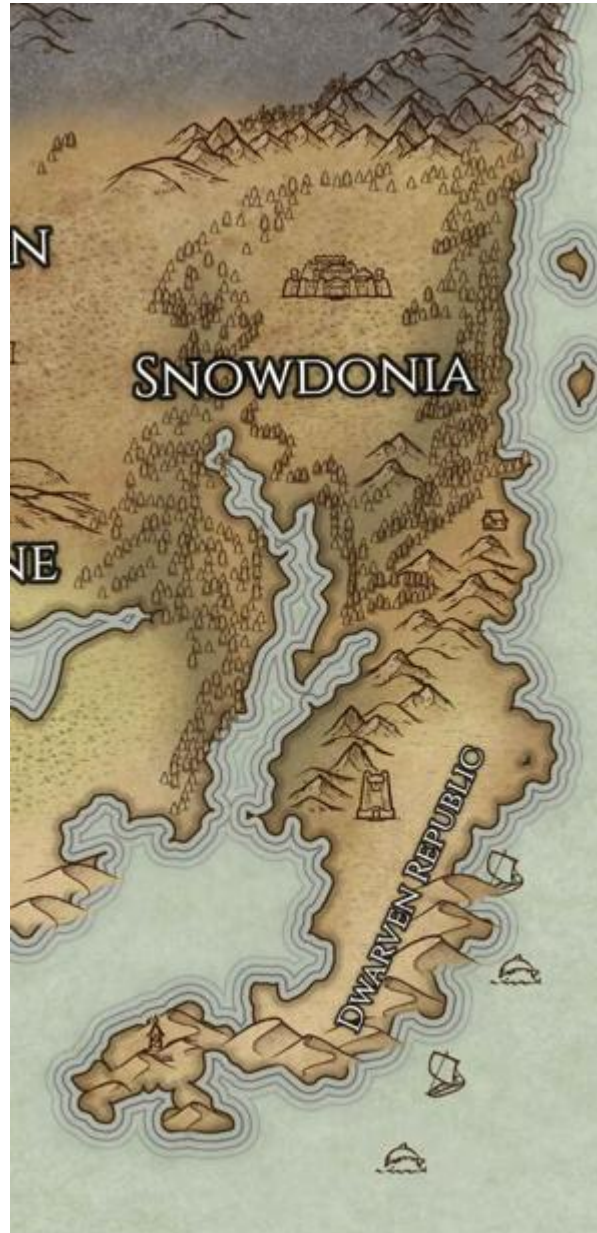
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Map of Istoire



Map of Snowdonia and The Dwarven Republic



Prologue

Prickles of anxiety skittered across Princess Nieve's skin as she hurried down yet another narrow stone corridor. She drew in a shaky breath, but somehow it wasn't enough to satisfy her lungs. It's always hard to breathe at Machturn Castle. Her thoughts were fractured, pulling her attention in too many directions.

As the doors to the Huntsmen barracks came into view up ahead, Nieve took a few stuttering steps into a run, but quickly forced herself back to the semblance of a walk. Although no one was around at the moment, she didn't dare risk drawing attention to herself where courtiers might see. Seeing the Princess Royal running in full court dress to meet a Huntsman would be fine gossip for their poisoned political games.

It was precisely the reason she was glad her father had sent her to grow up at Asylbrunn, her mother's old family home, instead of at Machturn with him. She had seen him less often, but she had been free from judgment and unkindness. *Of course now that he's gone, I wish he had taken me with him everywhere, even if it meant bearing the weight of constant scrutiny.*

She pushed aside the thought of her father's death—the reason she was currently living at the castle with her stepmother and half brothers instead of her mother's old estate. His loss was another sorrow threatening to undo her. But right now, it wasn't the most pressing one. Her frenzied suspicions about the most recent court rumors were fraying every last fiber of her being.

Nieve let out a breathy sob as the usual claimant on her heart and thoughts forced its way forward in her mind. *Surely he didn't do it*, she pleaded with herself. A cramp pulled at her side, stinging just under her ribs. Reluctantly she slowed her pace, putting her hands on her hips and

drawing another shaky breath that felt too thin. Ancient stone walls seemed to loom over her in this dank and dark part of the castle.

Musty carpets covered the floor, muffling the sound of her footsteps. Each one thumped in time with the blood rushing through her temple, signaling the start of another headache. The pain mingled with her swirling thoughts, another disturbance pulling at her mind. *There's a reasonable explanation. He'll tell me if I can get him alone.* A jolt of panic made her heart wobble as she realized he may very well not be at the barracks at the moment. Her footsteps faltered. *He **must** be there.* She couldn't wait another minute to hear him refute the story floating around the castle.

Her eyes darted toward one of the few windows in the corridor, and she hurried over to peer out at the Huntsmen practice yard. *Empty.* Swallowing dryly, she scurried down the hall once more. *He'll be in the barracks. They're probably still eating.*

At the end of the corridor, a heavy wooden door creaked open on black metal hinges, the sound pulling at Nieve's fractured nerves. She stuttered to a stop as a small band of soldiers marched through, one after the other in neat, orderly succession.

Frozen in place in the center of the hallway, Nieve's eyes widened as the Huntsmen, denoted by their brown and red uniforms, continued toward her in a disciplined clip. She swayed on her feet, caught between a desire to run from so many warriors in one spot and the need to settle her suspicions. Finally, she caught sight of one of the tallest of the Huntsmen at the back. *Alaric.*

It was obvious he had seen her too by the way his shoulders stiffened and his mouth firmed into a line, but he refused to look at her. The strangled feeling in her chest only grew tighter at such a reaction. *It doesn't mean he did it,* she reassured herself.

"Princess Nieve, how may we be of assistance?"

A Huntsman near the front of the unit looked at her inquiringly. With a start, Nieve noticed they had come to a stop in front of her. She was blocking their way.

Nieve swallowed heavily, eyes darting to Alaric's face before landing back on the commander. *Another downside to being raised away from the castle. I'm not used to ordering people around.* She didn't have enough

courage left in her to meet the Huntsman's eyes, so she focused on her hands as they fiddled with her bracelet.

"Please, sir, I would like to have a word with Huntsman Weidmann, if I may."

The commander glanced back at Alaric, then offered a short bow. "Of course, Your Highness." He turned to issue an order at Alaric, then focused back to her. "If you will excuse us, Princess. He can catch up when you're finished."

Nieve nodded dumbly, then scrambled backward, realizing suddenly that they were waiting for her to move. Pressing her back against the wall, her heart thumped painfully against her chest as they filed past. She didn't dare look at them. To do so would betray her nerves—they were too raw to be able to pretend she was anything other than frantic.

Finally, all had passed except one. Alaric hadn't moved from his spot, still standing at attention, staring into the distance. Nieve stayed pressed against the wall for a moment as the rest of his unit's footsteps faded, not sure where to start.

"Has everything changed so much since last year that you won't even look at me?" she asked finally, anguish at his detachment bubbling over in the form of words.

He scoffed and broke his stiff posture, although he still didn't meet her eyes. "Has everything changed?" he asked, staring at the floor, scorn and world-weariness marring his face and making him look much older than seventeen years. Nieve was only a year younger than him, but his time as a Huntsman had aged him, whereas Nieve felt even younger and less capable than she had before the events of the last year.

"Your father is gone, and so is my... *brother*," Alaric spat the word, as if reluctant to acknowledge any relationship between him and the older brother he had always hero-worshiped. Nieve recoiled at the venom in his voice, pressing her back into the hard stone wall as if to edge away from Alaric's anger.

"Yes but that's... that's not what I meant. And we didn't have control over those things... right?" Nieve's voice trembled, but she pushed on as bravely as she could, desperate to get to the truth of the rumors. But in her heart, she feared to discover the truth of this angrier, darker version of her best friend. "Right?" she prompted again, barely containing a sob.

Alaric balled his hands at his side, and Nieve could see muscles rippling under his uniform tunic. The boy who had asked her to run away with him only a year ago was gone. The man in front of her was stronger, scruffier, and seemed to hold no place for her in his heart. This was their first moment alone since she had declined his offer, and he was full of disdain.

“If you’re insinuating I had something to do with the Dwarven traitors who assassinated the King—“

“No!” Nieve interrupted, pushing off the wall and pacing a few steps forward, her hands raised to placate him. “That’s not what I meant at all. Of course you didn’t. But people are saying...” she trailed off, gazing up at him in anguish as he finally met her eyes, his expression sharp and cold as he took a few steps toward her, overpowering her with a newfound height. *He’s grown at least two inches since last time I saw him.* Her traitorous mind couldn’t help noting every difference—they seemed to outweigh the similarities. He reached out as if to grab her shoulders and she shrunk away on instinct. Alaric froze, his mouth curling in disgust.

“Tell me,” he said, folding his arms in front of his chest and stepping back to put space between them, “what *are* people saying?”

Nieve hovered, vacillating between the desire to correct his misinterpretation and her overwhelming need to know the truth immediately. He had assumed that she didn’t want his touch, but she hadn’t shied away from *him*. Far from wanting distance between them, she craved their onetime familiarity more than ever. But she had never been used to physical affection, and she knew a touch from this suddenly grown-up version of Alaric would completely derail her attention. But as much as she wanted him to understand her heart, fear that the rumors were true won out.

“They say you killed him,” she uttered breathlessly, hardly daring to repeat the accusations she had heard flitting around the court. “That you hunted down your own brother for the crime of being a mage and you—you killed him by your own hand!” Nieve slapped a hand over her mouth to cover a sob. Trembling, she stood before him in agony, hungry to hear his words of denial.

When she gathered the courage to look up, his eyes were flat. If they were supposed to be windows to his soul, they had been bricked up within the last year. Where once even a glance between them could have conveyed

paragraphs, now she couldn't read a single line. The silence provoked her into speaking.

"I know it's not true. I *know* you couldn't do such a thing, even though the queen has organized a medal ceremony for you—there's been some mistake! And if there's something, some reason why you can't deny it to the world, you *can* tell me! You know you can trust in my silence! But please—" Nieve stepped forward again, seeking confirmation that her various explanations were true, wanting to feel the heart that had once held only warmth was still beating in his chest.

Alaric unfolded his arms and held his hands up to stop her. She froze just before she touched him, her fingers inches away from his.

Slowly they dropped to her sides as silence stretched between them again, tears threatening to spill on her cheeks. Alaric seemed to be considering her, weighing some judgment in the balance as she stood silent and overwrought.

He gave a swift nod, as if coming to a decision, then dropped his hands down and squared his shoulders. "I can tell you no such thing, Princess Nieve. Ritter is gone—and by my hand."

The words fell like stones on Nieve, prompting an anguished cry as they hit their mark. Her heart, only recently beginning to knit itself together from the death of her father, disintegrated at the utter loss of her dearest friend, even though he stood before her. He was no longer Alaric. Alaric was dead. This man was simply a Huntsman.

"If I," she gasped, gazing in his direction through watery eyes, unable to make out his features, "if I had known it would end up like this, I would have run with you gladly last year, knowing it would keep you from doing such darkness."

"No," Alaric growled, stepping so close she could feel his warmth, the scent of sage and starched clothes swirling around her. "It's best you refused me after all. This *darkness* was in me all along, and I would have found it soon enough once I had discovered you married me out of pity rather than wanting my heart."

"Your heart!" Nieve cried, raising her hand again to place it on his chest, but Alaric stepped back swiftly.

"Worry about it no longer, Princess, for I have none—it's been given in service to my country. I would expect you to commend me for it." He

bowed crisply and made to move around her, stopping suddenly as she grasped his wrist.

“I don’t believe it. He was your *brother*—he was...” Nieve dropped her voice. “I know your heart—it has no such darkness in it!”

Alaric pulled his wrist free, shaking it as if to rid himself of her touch and turned away without a word, following the direction his unit had taken and leaving the Princess staring after him with tears spilling down her cheeks.

*He’s lost to me. My only friend. The one I—*Nieve shook her head as he turned a corner. “Don’t go down that road,” she whispered to herself sternly, pulling out a handkerchief and attempting to stem the flow of tears. “You knew your paths could never lie together, even before this.”

Except now instead regret at sacrificing her happiness to benefit his future, there was only pain in knowing he had betrayed his brother, and himself. And she was left wondering how she could survive with so much heartbreak at one time.

Chapter One

Nieve - Ten Years Later

I put my hands on my hips and took a slow look around my cheerfully decorated room. It was small compared to my chambers in the palace, but I preferred the plain wooden wainscoting and cheerfully painted flowers on the plaster ceiling to my richly appointed royal rooms. They were beautiful, but everything in them was meant to convey status and wealth. These had been painted by my grandmother when my mother was a baby, and the faded paint still conveyed love and joy across the years. That was another reason I loved this room; it had belonged to my mother, Queen Elfreda, as a child and made me feel as though she was holding me in her embrace, even though she had died before I could even form memories of her.

The light from the fireplace danced on my wooden bed frame, built into an alcove in the thick manor walls. As always, my eyes were drawn to the badly carved name on one of the panels, covered with a few layers of varnish that did little to hide the vandalism. *Elfy* it read, which had apparently been my mother's nickname. Nanny had told me the story many times, having heard it from my mother long ago. Although Elfreda was remembered by the kingdom for her goodness and gentleness, as a child she had been overtaken by that same fit that overtakes all children—practicing her writing on the wall. Apparently her indulgent parents had laughed instead of punishing her, covering the carving up with a coat of varnish instead of sanding it smooth.

I smiled, feeling wistful about my family as always. *My grandparents sound like such cheerful people—I wish I could have met them.* But they had died from a plague when my mother was young. Since they were technically a very minor aristocratic family, it had left the young Elfreda as a ward of the court.

A pang of loneliness struck me, of fellow-feeling with the orphaned child that later became my mother. She had lost her doting parents, but the very fact that she was a ward of the court was the reason she met my father, the future King Garold, and became Queen. I sighed. Someday I hoped to have children that would carve their names next to my mother's— and mine, which I had added after Nanny first told me the story. But that seemed a far-off dream at this point.

When I was younger, I had been taught to expect a mostly political marriage, although I knew my father wouldn't make me marry someone I didn't like. After his death, I trusted that my stepmother, Queen Katharina, wouldn't force me into a bad situation either, even though she struggled to fill my father's shoes as regent for my younger brother, King Barrett. I wouldn't have faulted her for using my hand in marriage to solidify her power base. Somehow as the years passed, the talk of potential marriage alliances had faded, especially as I hadn't exactly been pushing for one. I was grateful for the lack of pressure, but at twenty-six, I wanted to be doing something, experiencing something new.

"And now I am," I told myself, patting my trunk before perching on top of it. My feet were starting to ache after a day running to and fro into every room of the house as we packed.

The door to my room opened, admitting a gust of chilly air from the hall as my Nanny, Agatha Engel, trundled in carrying a pile of linens.

"Don't sit on that!" she scolded, pushing the door shut behind her. "We spent all day packing it just right; we don't need you breaking the thing at the last minute!"

I laughed at her fussing and slipped off the trunk, almost falling over a smaller trunk filled with my drawing supplies.

"You think you've secured all the pens and papers and things you'll need for your work?" she asked, nodding to the little case as she laid the clean linens on my bed.

"Yes, finally," I replied, smiling back at her. Although I had trained as a cartographer in the final years of my education, it had mostly been for something to do that combined my love of art and my love of the outdoors. The only time I had used my skills beyond my scholarly assignments was to create detailed maps of my own manor lands. I hadn't really minded, but it seemed wrong to let a skill go unused.

The fireplace warmed my back as I bobbed on my heels, the promise of adventure and a chance to contribute to the safety of our country sparking excitement wouldn't let me sit still. I looked back at Nanny only to catch a glimpse of her stretching on tiptoes to put some of the linens on the highest shelf of the cupboard.

"Oh let me do that!" I demanded and hurried over, gently helping to push the linens into place and holding out my hands for the next stack.

She handed me a few more with a mock stern look. "Thank you, my dear, although you're hardly taller than I am. And you can't be doing such things when we reach the palace. I've never known a princess to act like that!"

I laughed. "Do you know many princesses, Nanny?"

"Impudent child!" she scolded, not quite able to keep a grin off her face as she handed me the next stack of sheets.

"Don't worry, I'll remember," I assured her. "I always do when we go up for holidays. It's not nearly as comfortable as home so I don't forget the rules. Although this time I'll spend most of the trip with a band of Huntsmen scouting. I don't think I need to play the lady of the manor with them."

"Probably more so, I would imagine," Nanny muttered darkly, handing me the last stack of laundry.

"What does that mean?!" I demanded, but she just clucked her tongue and shook her head, closing the cupboard door after I put the sheets inside.

"Too many handsome men with nothing to do for a few weeks while you're sketching the countryside. They'll be mooning after you the whole time. Best if you act every inch above them that you actually are. It will discourage their advances."

I raised my eyebrows in surprise, then lowered them again in suspicion. "You know I have no desire to run into any flirtations, so I suspect it's your own desires supplying the idea. Eager to see a certain Chief Archivist again?"

Nanny slapped her hands to her cheeks, attempting to hide the instant flush that glowed there. "I say it again—impudent child!"

"Well, if I *am* impudent you only have yourself to blame since you practically raised me," I teased her before wrapping her in a loose hug and kissing her forehead. "But seriously, I hope you enjoy every minute of his company that you can while I'm out in the field." A thrill went through me

as I said those words. *I'll be out doing something useful for once, as a princess royal should be!*

Nanny patted my back and I let her go, watching her with fond eyes as she bustled about the room. "I do intend to spend as much time with Reiner as possible," she admitted, not looking me in the eyes.

I sobered, my teasing mood slipping away. I had long suspected that if she didn't feel such a responsibility to me, having effectively taken the place of my mother after her death when I was a year old, Agatha would have married Reiner long ago and had daughters of her own. The only time I had ever broached the subject with her, she had fussed and carried on until I dropped it. But I still worried that she had missed out on a life that should have been hers for the sake of duty toward me.

"Perhaps..." I ventured hesitantly, "perhaps while you're there, he will mention plans for retiring soon? I'm sure my stepmother would offer him a healthy pension for all his years of service. And besides," I continued, hurrying on as Agatha opened her mouth, "I'm fully grown now! I don't need a constant companion, as much as I love your company." I smiled at her. "It's just that I want your happiness too."

She offered me a soft smile but shook her head. "I am happy dear. And I'll hear no more of that talk. We have a long journey in the morning, so let's be off to bed now." She came across to give me a kiss on my forehead and then bustled out of the room.

I turned toward my wardrobe, pulling out a nightgown and glancing out the window at the frosty night sky. *I can't wait until tomorrow!*

Snow swirled in dusty white circles in the gravel courtyard outside the kitchen window. The whistle of Nanny's kettle screeched to its conclusion as she lifted it away from the fireplace with a kitchen towel to protect her hands, pouring the scalding swiftly into the waiting china teapot. I wrapped my shawl a little closer and came forward, accepting the mug she poured out for me with a grateful smile and wrapping my hands around the

steaming hot cup. The scent of apple tea swept over me, and I closed my eyes in a happy, sleepy smile.

Asylbrunn apples were some of the best apples in the world, and we used every one that our little orchard produced. There weren't enough to turn into a commercial enterprise, but there were enough that we ate them nearly every day in some form or another. I never felt right unless I had a cup of apple infused tea to start off my day. We always brought some on our trips to the castle, and Nanny had tucked a sachet of the mix into my art supplies as I had packed so I could have it on the expedition too.

We sipped our respective mugs quietly, enjoying the final moments in our cozy kitchen and watching the predawn light as it woke up along with us.

Finally, we came to the end of our mugs, and I handed mine to Nanny for washing up. "I'll just go around and say goodbye to the animals, and then I'll be ready," I said, smiling as she shook her head at me. My penchant for befriending our small barn full of farm animals was a source of bemusement to her, as she hated any speck of mud or fur that found its way into the house. But I had always had a knack for soothing animals, which my farm manager made full use of when any of the livestock became a little unruly.

Pulling on my traveling cloak, I dashed across the courtyard into the barn, waving at one of the farmhands at the other end when he poked his head up to see who it was. He called a few good wishes for my trip before bending back to his task and leaving me alone to give goodbyes to each cow, horse, and pig in their respective stalls. The hardest to leave were the barn cats, who threatened to follow me into the frozen courtyard, but I finally convinced them to stay in the warmth of the barn by kicking a little ball they enjoyed batting around into a nearby empty stall.

Our carriage was waiting by the manor gates, but Nanny was nowhere to be found yet, so I took a meandering stroll around the perimeter of the house, knowing I would be missing the ability to walk—if not the brittle cold—after a few hours in the carriage. I let my eyes travel over the familiar timber and plaster frame of my mother's house, smiling as the waterwheel came into view, creaking as it spun its ponderous load around from the sluggish creek that ran by our house. The wheel provided water for the kitchen and laundry, as well as powered a small mill that was attached to the barn and provided the estate with the ability to mill the surrounding

area's grain. It had been a marvelous contraption to play with as a child, and I had spent many years lazily sketching it from different angles and taking frequent breaks to nap in the sunlight.

I wrapped my cloak tighter as the wind picked up again and meandered around the rest of the house, my eyes betraying me by sliding over to the woods in the distance. I could see smoke puffing up from beyond the treeline, marking the Weidmann's cottage. The treeline represented the boundary of my tiny estate, which butted up against the larger estate of a minor baron, whom Mr. Weidmann worked for as a hunter. I had spent many days running wild on my own estate with his son, Alaric, who used to be my best friend. My lips curved slightly in a reluctant smile. That was years ago, when class meant nothing and the grown-ups were too busy to be worried about us children. We had taken different paths since then. *Very different paths.*

The door slammed and I wrenched my eyes away from the barren trees, hurrying around the side of the house and back into the courtyard. Nanny was there, looking around for me and waving as I came into view.

"We may as well get a move on, my dear," she called, opening the door as I came close. I motioned for her to get in before me. "The sun is just coming up so the driver will be able to see. I hope we can make it to the first inn before dark!"

I smiled as I climbed up behind her, pulling the door shut and latching it before sinking onto the relatively warm carriage seat. She said that every time we went to the castle, and, in winter at least, we never did arrive before nightfall.

"Thank you," I murmured as Nanny handed me a hot brick wrapped in cloth. I settled it on my lap, soaking in the heat gratefully. She smiled as she did the same with her own and the vehicle jerked forward, heading toward adventure at last.

Stepping down from the carriage, I began to stretch out the kinks in my spine before catching myself. *Time to behave less like a country bumpkin and more like the princess royal.* Luckily there wasn't anyone in the courtyard to see me, as it was even more bitterly cold than at Asylbrunn and already getting dark. I shook my head at my worries and smiled. *Surely even the most gracious courtier would need a stretch after such a long carriage ride!*

Walking stiffly, I led the way inside, Nanny trailing in my wake as protocol required. *I can't wait to see the boys again... and Katharina.* Every year since my father had died, my poor stepmother had become less like the intelligent and kind companion I had known as a girl. The troubles of the throne weighed on her as she did her best to preserve it until my brother, King Barrett, came of age. *Perhaps I can cheer her up while I'm here.*

We hurried into the ornate receiving hall, and I looked around for my brothers. They were usually on hand when I arrived for celebrations, but today the hall was dark and quiet. My face fell, and a little worm wriggled in my heart, whispering lies about my importance to my family.

Finally I caught sight of my stepmother, standing on the lower landing of the imposing main staircase, her dark gown blending in with the shadows. As she moved forward, the deep purple of her dress seemed to glimmer darkly in the candlelight. She had never given up wearing mourning colors after my father's death, although the high-necked black cape she wore over her dress was a new touch. *Another fashion of the court, probably. I hope I won't have to wear one. I suppose it would be handy in warding off the chills in this old castle, though.*

Even though we seemed to be alone in the hall, I curtsied to Katharina, knowing she was a stickler for protocol, before moving forward to give her a hug. She waved me back, lifting a lace edged handkerchief to her nose.

"No, no! I have been plagued by illness this winter season and wouldn't want to pass it along or pick up something new. Especially since the Solstice celebrations are tomorrow."

I nodded, giving her a sympathetic look. Her nose did look a little red. So did her eyes. "How horrible! I know how busy you are in the winter—are you getting enough rest?" I gave a soft chuckle before she could respond. "I know the answer to that—you never do. Your diligence in working for the

good of the kingdom and Barrett wouldn't allow it. I'm happy to help with anything while I'm here."

Katharina pushed a strained smile onto her face, glancing back at Nanny, who hovered a few steps behind me, and giving her a small nod of acknowledgment before turning back to me. "What a kind offer, Nieve, but I am certainly up to the task that has been put before me." Her tone was brittle, which pierced my heart.

She must really not be feeling herself. Katharina was never exactly overflowing with maternal warmth, but she used to have endless patience with me. I had always counted on her to help my visits to court run smoothly. *The throne will do that to anyone. It's too much for her to bear—I wish she would let me help.* But she probably knew better than anyone that I wasn't suited for it. I hated disappointing people, and from what I had seen over the years, ruling amounted to creating solutions that provided equal levels of disappointment to everyone. I shuddered. It was good of Katharina to shield poor Barrett from that as long as possible.

My stepmother must have noticed my shudder. "There's no reason to linger in this drafty hall. Your chambers have been prepared as usual. I'm sure you would like to warm up." She nodded toward the jeweled comb Nanny had stuck in my hair just before we drove up to the castle. "I see you are wearing your comb. Good girl." She hesitated, her eyes on the delicate jeweled apple blossoms that sparkled against my dark hair instead of me. "Be sure to wear it for your visit here, as usual, but also during your—" she met my eyes for a brief moment and lowered her voice, "your trip after the Solstice song. Promise me that you will wear it then too. Conceal it if you must, but wear it, as a token for me." She swallowed heavily and I couldn't read the expression in her eyes.

I blinked. It was a bit of a strange request to ask me to wear jewelry while tromping through the wilds. But probably, I wouldn't be doing much tromping. Riding all day, sketching terrain as needed, and bedding down in a snug tent my attendants would set up was probably what awaited me on my first big adventure. *She needs reassurance that she's doing a good job as a stepmother. She probably wishes she could accompany me on my first mission. After all, she's the one who encouraged me to use my artistic skills to train as a cartographer.*

I gave her a smile with as much understanding and love as I could muster, wishing I could reach out and hug her instead. “Of course, Katharina. It will be a reminder of you and the boys while I’m gone.”

She managed a weak smile back and nodded, then pulled her dark velvet cloak tight around her shoulders and dismissed me and Nanny. I glanced back before we left the hall. The sight of her tugged at my heart, contrasted as it was in my mind to the memory of her in the same spot on the day she married my father. She hadn’t aged hardly at all, but her whole manner had changed. Instead of the graceful, scholarly beauty that represented hope for our family and our country, she now held herself tightly, as if expecting a blow or some doom to fall upon her.

The same crown sat on her head as she had always worn. In my childhood memories it had seemed like gleaming rays of sunlight crowning her glossy walnut hair. Today those rays were dull, more like the tips of the spears the royal guards carried as part of their sentry duties. Instead of a scholar and a bride she was a commander and a queen. I shuddered and turned away again. *I’m glad I don’t have to carry that weight. I would collapse within the first day.*

Chapter Two

Alaric

The gold threaded embroidery on my collar, marking my rank as a Master Royal Huntsman, prickled against the skin at my throat. I ignored the urge to scratch it. The irritation didn't matter, and I wasn't a slave to my body. There is something satisfying about denying natural instincts; in proving that although I work hard every moment of the day to strengthen my muscles and reflexes, my mind is still the strongest weapon I have. It was a sentiment I knew my hunting partner, Arden, shared.

I glanced across the table at my friend, who was methodically packing supplies into his rucksack, same as me. *At least, I suppose he's my friend. We share the same ideals, the same goals. We work together seamlessly. He makes me laugh.* I frowned, slowing the pace at which I rolled and packed supplies fractionally. *I'm sure he's made me laugh before. But what about?* My mind went blank for a moment as I scoured my memory for the last time I had really laughed. I couldn't think of anything funny happening for a long time. *But Arden laughs a lot. Maybe I'm just remembering him laughing.*

My friend proved my point by laughing softly now. More of a chuckling snort than a real laugh as he raised his eyebrows at me. "Second guessing the mission, Alaric? I told you I can take point if you want. My plan would leave less loose ends."

I pressed my lips together and shook my head as I started packing again more quickly. "No. The plan is good. Besides, the queen commanded me specifically. If you want to keep your head, you'll need to be able to pass the High Inquisitor's truth test and tell them that I cut out the heart.

Arden laughed a little more loudly, the sound echoing oddly in the small supplies locker we were in. He turned back to his task, muttering under his

breath. I didn't bother trying to hear what he was saying. After years fighting together at the Wasteland, or the Dwarven border, or on patrol within the kingdom itself, I knew all his secrets and he knew all of mine.

Well, almost all. I had surprised him a few weeks ago when we started planning this latest mission I had been charged with. Ostensibly, our mission was to accompany a royally sanctioned cartographer out to some of the northwestern reaches in our kingdom. There were many areas of the wilds that had never been mapped, as our trouble with the Beasts from the northern Wasteland had mostly been kept to a minimum due to the mountainous terrain. In recent generations, the Huntsmen had been increasingly engaged to the north, becoming more of a military unit than the forestry patrol that had been our original purpose. As the beasts spread into rarely explored mountain terrain to the northeast of our country we needed better maps to help ensure continued security at our border.

Except any map our royal cartographer might start on this trip will never be finished. Only the four of us Huntsmen assigned to the expedition knew our real mission, and only Arden and myself knew the details of how it would be carried out. I stuffed the last packet of supplies into my rucksack, pulled the drawstring tight, and secured the top flap with a buckle. Arden was already hefting his pack on his shoulders, ready to take it to his room at the barracks so it would be ready to grab after the feasting tonight. I moved to do the same but stopped him as he reached for the supply room door.

"I forgot one thing. The Queen told me that we must ensure the target keeps a certain hair comb decorated with apple blossoms on her person at all times. Apparently it keeps her magic suppressed as long as she wears it a few hours each day."

Arden nodded, his wide-set eyes alight with mirth. "It will keep Snow White looking pretty to the last, no doubt, too," he mocked, using the Princess' code name and watching me intently for my reaction.

Although I knew he was just trying to get a rise out of me, I couldn't help the way my jaw tightened. He caught the small betrayal with his eagle eyes, and his lips twisted into a half grin at my tell. He knew my history with the Princess and never missed a chance to needle someone over things like that. "Never mind, Alaric. I'll help make sure she wears it. But I suggest you break it after you finish the butchering—otherwise the magic within it might be traceable."

I nodded, recognizing the wisdom in his counsel. That was one of the reasons Arden was such a good hunting partner. Behind his professional facade lay a slightly unhinged interior. But at his core he was a man of sharp intelligence and wisdom. He never missed a detail, and neither did I.

Our preparations finished, he pulled open the door and filed out with me close on his heels. *We'll need every bit of guile we both have to pull off this next mission. Otherwise it will be **our** blood that is spilled.*



The hum of voices competed with the minstrels playing in the gallery above to drown out the clatter of dishes and tread of the servants' feet as they bustled around the feasting hall, delivering drinks, clearing up finished courses, and laying out the next. It was only on feast days like the Winter Solstice that the banquet hall had such a cheerful heartbeat. Though I spent most of my time in the field, I knew it to be a dreary place usually, filled with hushed conversations between courtiers, who strained their ears to hear what the others were saying.

Tonight, with everyone several drinks into the mead and filled with the royal table's bounty, it almost seemed like a place you'd want to be.

I took a sip from my cup, observing the flushed faces of the finest families of our court. My cider was watered down to the point of being almost flavorless, but I didn't care. I never drank alcohol if I could help it. I didn't like the way it clouded my wits, and I liked even less the way that it beckoned you to lay down your burdens for a while. Laying down burdens only made them harder to pick up in the morning.

From where I leaned against the wall in the back of the feasting hall, I could see most of the guests and all of the exits. Candlelight filtered down in a warm glow from iron candelabras hanging above the revelers, casting a cheerful light on their faces. All the major families were there, just as they had been ordered. My eyes flicked to the royal table. The queen and her sons were there, with the princess seated according to her rank, next to the younger prince. My eyes slid right over her face, knowing far too well the

soft smile and kindness that would be hovering there, whether she was talking to her brother or to the server who brought her food. Looking at her would only make my mission harder. I never made my missions harder than they needed to be.

My eyes flicked to Arden, seated with a few of the other high ranking Huntsmen who were invited to feasts like these. I could join them if I chose, but I never did. So long as I showed my face, I would appease the court, and after doing that, I always faded into the background, staying just long enough to ensure it wouldn't be remarked upon when I left.

At Winter Solstice, that meant staying to listen to the princess sing.

In years past it had been a test to myself to increase my endurance. This year it might be a penance for what I was about to do. A traitorous voice whispered in my mind. *And maybe you stay because you want to.* I pressed my lips together. *I never do what I want to do. I only do what I have to do.*

A stirring out of the corner of my eye warned me that her song was imminent, confirmed by the way the entire court turned in her direction and the swift silence of the musicians in the gallery. Servers ceased their movement amongst the tables, drifting toward the outside of the feasting floor, while others hustled past me from their stations in the kitchens and washrooms nearby, jostling quietly for a spot at the edge to watch her sing. They blocked my view, but that was a help, not a hindrance. *You'll be seeing her soon enough.*

She addressed a few words to the crowd, eliciting appreciative murmurs at whatever she said, and I could hear the gentle smile in her tone. I didn't bother attempting to hear her words. They wouldn't be for me, even if she knew I was in the crowd, which she surely did not. *Let the others hear them and take them to their mead-soaked hearts. If they knew what my orders were they would mob me in an instant to protect her. Though if they knew why those orders had been given to me, they might turn on their beloved princess just as quickly.* I shook my head in derision, taking a sip from my cup again as I strained to hear the first notes of the song she sang each year.

As always, they came as soft as spring. Her voice was sweet and clear, full of promise and hope, a reminder that the dark days of winter would be short if only we would hold on. The urge to snarl at such sentiments passed through me quickly, but I didn't give in to the instinct. *After all, spring does come every year, just as she sings about. Only she'll never see another one*

here again. Her song ended, and as always, the court erupted in applause and shouts of praise. She had been singing to them since she was a little girl, the pride of her father, shown off once a year at Yuletide. She had continued after his death, endearing her to the people even though she was rarely seen at the capitol.

A vision of the feasting hall next winter solstice flitted through my mind, grey and hushed, no reclusive, kind princess there to sing of hope and new life. *They don't deserve the hope she sings of. And if they knew what she was, they'd strangle that hope with their bare hands.*

A group of servants directly in front of me dashed back to their stations, opening a clear line of sight to where Princess Nieve still stood. Before I could look away, I caught sight of her, and my heart stopped.

She stood in an island of calm at the front of the room, smiling down at a group of courtiers who were saying something to her. Her coal black hair hung down past her shoulders like a curtain of shadow. Her cheeks were red with bashfulness at whatever compliments the courtiers were passing along, the blush made even more apparent in contrast to her usual moon pale complexion. Her red lips curved into a sweet smile, then opened in a gentle laugh as she shook her head and turned away from the crowd, curtsying to her stepmother and half brothers before taking her seat, her burgundy velvet dress swishing cheerfully around at her every gesture. My eyes were drawn to a twinkling in her hair, no doubt the magic-suppressing apple blossom comb that had been described to me.

My eyes flicked to the queen and my fingers tightened around my cup of cider. Her usual pinched expression flickered with something dangerous as she surveyed the court fawning over her stepdaughter. There was fear there and weariness from her burdens, but there was envy there too, and malice. *I should have expected that, given my orders. But it's rare to see such a display from our supposedly high-minded queen.* In an instant, the expression was gone, and she edged toward her oldest son, the young King Barrett, king in name only for a few more years.

Next to him, Prince Koen leaned toward the princess and whispered something in her ear. She smiled at him and turned back toward her plate, ready to focus on the desserts a servant had brought her. She hesitated for a moment, her brow wrinkling and my heart turned strangely in my chest. *She senses something wrong. She can feel me watching her, feel that the moment*

she is in isn't the only reality on this Winter Solstice night. She lifted her head to glance my way, but I was already gone. Let her have these few moments. I had a job to do, and achingly beautiful princesses didn't always get the happy endings they deserved.

Chapter Three

Nieve

I sat lightly on the edge of my massive bed, smiling as Agatha bustled around my chamber. The fire was starting to die down a little, but that was fine. I was almost too warm in my woolen dress and fur-lined tunic and cape. A Huntsman was supposed to be coming to my rooms shortly to escort me to the stables. We were leaving under cover of darkness to not attract too much attention. I knew my way to the stables well enough, so I wasn't sure why the escort was necessary, but in my heart of hearts I was glad of it. Adventuring was not an activity that I was familiar with, so starting out with a top-secret commission was nerve-wracking. Although maybe more so for my Nanny.

"Agatha," I called as she swept back across the room for the tenth time to check my pack for something. "Everything is ready. It's been packed for days. There's no need to worry!"

She clucked her tongue at me and came across the room, grabbing one of my mother's old embroidered shawls from where it lay folded on a nearby table and throwing it around my shoulders. I let her fold it into more of a scarf shape and then tugged the ends from her hands with a smile, tucking them into my bodice.

"It will be a little piece of your mother to take with you," she said, patting my shoulders and glancing up at the comb tucked into my hair. I patted the jeweled flowers.

"Both of my mothers," I said, then stood up and pulled Agatha into a hug. "And I'll take a hug from my Nanny, too. I'm sure I'll be wishing I could have a hug after a few cold days and nights sleeping on hard ground.

She squeezed me back hard, trying and failing to hide a snuffle.

“It will be good for me!” I admonished, pulling out of her arms and laughing as she wiped away a stray tear. “And it will be good for you to get some time to yourself for once. Just remember that you’re to—”

“Say you’ve had an illness and want to recover back at home, yes I know. And yes I’ll be sure to spend some time with Reiner before I leave, so stop hounding me about it,” she continued, shaking her head at me. “I’ll be waiting to welcome you back home when your trip is done.”

I smiled and glanced at the clock on the mantle. “I know you will. Now off with you! The Huntsman will be here soon, and apparently I’m supposed to be alone.”

Agatha gave me one last peck on the cheek before slipping through the connecting door between our chambers. She would be listening at the door, I knew, but I didn’t want the Huntsman to think I wasn’t taking my role seriously by having my Nanny hanging around when he came. I tried to settle back down on my bedside again, but instead found myself tracing Agatha’s anxious steps, just barely audible from next door, as the clock ticked toward midnight.

Finally, the knock on my door came—two sharp knocks followed by three soft ones. A thrill tumbled around my belly. *This is it!* I took a quick breath and hurried over. The fire had burned almost to embers, and my fingers scrabbled with the latch in the low light. Finally, I unhooked it properly, swinging the door open and looking up at the sandy-haired Huntsman with green eyes filling the doorframe in ghostly grayish-brown hunting leathers.

My greeting died on my lips as my heart swooped out from my chest. I could feel the blood drain from my face, and I rocked backward slightly as a spell of dizziness swept over me. *Alaric.*

In a moment, too fast for me to see, he was *there*. His hands gripped my upper arms, anchoring me so close to him I could feel him breathe. The scent of him washed over me, oiled leather and sage. *He’s always smelled like sage. But the leather is new.* I inhaled a deep breath to make my dizziness pass, but his scent crowded me, invading my lungs and smashing together my current tangled reality with memories that wouldn’t stay where they had been put.

I licked my dry lips, a blush ripping across my face as I saw him watch. I jerked my arms out of his grip—or at least attempted to. His hands followed

my motion easily, but after a moment, he seemed to realize that I was trying to get away from him, no longer in danger of fainting, and released me.

His release was so sudden I rocked backward again, not quite steady on my feet, which seemed to tangle in my cape. I managed to right myself, however, shaking out my skirts and readjusting my scarf as I attempted to quell my traitorous heart. I hadn't really thought of him in years, having resigned him to a corner of my past to sit and gather dust. *But now he's here, seeing me, touching me.* My fingers flexed as I remembered the warmth of him under my hands, and another blush stole across my face as I remembered him watching me lick my lips. My rebellious hands snaked up to press against my cheeks, but I stopped them just in time. *I must look like a maiden at her first May Day dance.* I dared a glance back at Alaric with failing courage, dreading to see the scorn on his face for the woman who had once rejected him but was now apparently falling all over herself at his nearness. Mercifully he wasn't looking at me, but glancing around my room, his eyes missing nothing.

I rubbed my hands over my upper arms as I tried to think of something to say, then snatched them away as I realized I was rubbing out the spot where he had touched me. His eyes were back on me and the panicky feeling was building again. In an effort to press forward past the moment of his embrace—*near embrace, really not an embrace at all, just preventing you from falling flat on your back*—I asked the first question that popped into my head.

"What are you doing here?" I cringed at my breathlessness and cleared my throat, wondering if I had spoken too quietly to hear.

He pressed his lips together and glanced over to my packs. *He's annoyed at such a stupid question. Now he'll think I not only forgot how to stand since I last saw him, but how to think!* I tried desperately to think of something smarter to say, but my brain was just as choked as my throat.

"I'm here to escort you to the stables," he rumbled out, his voice deeper than I remembered, but smooth. In two strides he reached my packs, slinging one on his back and taking the other in one hand. He hesitated, then held an arm out to me as if we were at a court ball. "Do you need assistance walking there?" he asked.

I blinked at him for a moment before his meaning sunk in. "No—no! I'm perfectly capable of walking," I protested, mortified. My hands dithered in

front of me. I wasn't sure what to do with them now that there was nothing left for me to carry.

Alaric moved toward the door, which had drifted closed after he had stepped into the room. He opened it back up with his free hand, and I realized I must look like a complete nuisance, standing there with nothing as he carried both my packs and held open the door for me. I hurried through, hoping the dying embers hid my embarrassment from his prying green eyes, and waited anxiously in the hallway as he pulled the door shut behind us.

He swept down the hall, somehow noiseless despite his massive height and the two packs he carried. I scurried after him, grimacing as my shoes scraped against the flagstones. Finally, I caught up to him, still hurrying to keep pace with his long strides.

"I'm not weak," I protested in a whisper after several minutes of silence. "I was just surprised back there, that's all." He threw a glance my way in the dim hall, but I couldn't see the expression on his face. "I won't faint or anything, during the trip."

"It doesn't matter if you faint every day on the trip. The queen has ordered that you and I go, so we go," he replied in his quiet baritone. "And there will be four of us there to catch you, if that's the case," he added, almost two quietly to hear.

I gaped at him, falling behind a step or two, then shook my head. *Surely that wasn't a joke. His tone wasn't... and he didn't laugh. And after all that's passed between us...* I shook my head sternly. I needed to get whatever urge was inside me to connect with him right out of my head. Even if he used to make me laugh every day, that was before. The man pacing down the hall in front of me was a different person to the boy I knew.

"If there was any danger of me fainting, my stepmother would never have authorized me to go on this mission," I reassured him, feeling pathetic even as I tried to assert my competence. He flicked another look back at me but his expression was still shrouded in shadows. *He doesn't believe me. I'll just have to prove it to him. Not that I need to prove anything. There's too much distance between us for that. But I'd like to think that the other Huntsmen would have a chance to view me as a part of the team.* With that end in mind, I hurried a little faster to keep up with Alaric.



The reason for my escort became apparent soon after we left my wing in the palace. The stables we were going to were the ones used by the military, not the main palace stables. I had never actually been to them before and strained my eyes to see what details I could make out in the murky shadows. Alaric handed off my pack to one of three other Huntsmen who were waiting with the horses. They introduced themselves to me, and as soon as my pack was secure, everyone turned in a flurry of quiet movements to mount their horses.

Somehow Alaric was at my side again, handing me the reins of my own steed before holding his hands out to assist me up. My heart jumped into my throat again, but I didn't give myself time to think. Stepping into his hands, I pushed off the ground, allowing his easy strength to assist me up onto a comfortable saddle. He busied himself with adjusting my stirrups, and I busied myself with ignoring every time his hand brushed my ankle until he stepped away to his own horse. There was a lull in everyone's movements, then suddenly Alaric started forward, leading the rest of us out of the stables toward an open side gate in the castle wall.

Alaric must be the leader of this mission. A stab of pain pricked at my heart. Why didn't Katharina warn me? Did she forget that we used to be best friends? Or did she think I would refuse to help if I knew he would be a part of things? Probably she had thought it wouldn't matter. It had been so long since my friendship with Alaric ended that she must have assumed I would be indifferent. *I assumed I would be indifferent to him. And I am!* I instructed myself sternly as we settled into a canter along the moonlit gravel road beyond the castle walls. *It's only surprise at seeing him without warning that's making you feel so strange. Yes, he's more handsome than ever, and yes, you still care about what he thinks and how he is—but you know the answers to those questions. You can never go back to that moment where he asked you to run away with him. He's not that boy, and you're not that girl.*

Still, the memory of that night haunted me as we settled into a monotonous rhythm. His face as I explained the reasons we couldn't be

together. The surety I felt that I was doing what was best for him-and for us. The pride I had felt every time I heard a report of his successes after he entered the Huntsmen... and inexorably, the horror and regret that had pierced my very soul after he had killed his brother. *If I had just said yes, it never would have happened. We would be living in a tiny cottage somewhere, our souls both whole and unburdened. Maybe children and deep friendships*—with effort, I swept the old picture of the two of us away. It was a fairytale. The reality was, we both were bound by duty, and that duty meant I needed to focus on the mission in front of me, not a fairytale that could never have been written.

Chapter Four

Alaric

Smoke curled from the campfire Nieve and the others crowded around, finishing the remnants of their lunch. The scent of its acrid smoke turned my stomach, making the small meal I had just finished sit uneasily. We had set up a makeshift camp in a little dell, both to start a fire for our meal and warmth, but also to give Nieve a chance to work on her sketches. Usually after we had eaten we would pack up and move north again until almost sunset. But today was different. After today, everything would be different.

I looked over at Arden and gave a subtle nod. He responded by jumping to his feet and brushing off his pants. I followed suit more slowly, taking my time to pull on my rucksack and grab Nieve's bag of sketching implements. I handed it to Arden, who pulled it onto his back and led Nieve toward the caves we had told her about earlier in the day. I let them get several yards ahead before turning to the other two huntsmen in our company.

"You stay here and mind the camp and horses, as we planned. Arden and I will manage it between us. She has a magical object on her that we may need to neutralize, so it may take a little longer than we're expecting. Don't come looking for us, we'll bring the... heart back when it's safe."

They nodded their heads grimly and saluted before turning back to the fire. Taking a deep breath, I turned to follow Nieve and Arden.

We hiked across two small ridges, then wound our way down along a steep gorge. The entrance to the cave system was partially hidden between an ancient, twisted pine tree and a rocky shale outcrop. I pulled out a rawhide lantern from my pack and lit it, brushing past the ferns at the cave entrance and leading the way inside. My shoulders brushed sandy stone walls, knocking bits of dust and grit to the cave floor. After a few feet, the

narrow passage opened into a rough chamber with plenty of headroom. It was wide enough that we could all stand in it without brushing against each other.

I lifted my lantern high enough to cast a pool of amber around the space. Arden shrugged off Nieve's pack and shot me a look. Nieve was turned away from us, her dark hair blending with the shadows as she peered down one of the handful of passages that led off from this first chamber. The sight of her guileless curiosity tugged at something in my chest. I ground my teeth and crushed the feeling as she turned around.

"Let's get to work," I said to her. She nodded, then began unpacking her supplies as I continued. "Arden will guard the cave entrance, and I will assist you here. Orders are to make a detailed map in case this system can be used as a rallying point for soldiers in future fights at the Wasteland."

She nodded, stealing a quick look at me but focusing on her task instead of attempting small talk. Same as she had been treating me for the entire week we had spent in the woods so far. Obviously tired and sore from a week in the saddle and far from the comforts she was used to, Nieve was still a diligent worker. I couldn't help admiring her for it.

Arden stalked silently out of the cave. We had at least an hour or two to kill before Arden would be ready with his part of the plan and all would be revealed, so I settled in patiently. As I watched, she pulled off her leather gloves, one finger at a time and stuffed them into a pocket in her cape. Smoothing out a grid lined paper, she began making notes along one side, something I had seen her do many times. Like everything else about her, her handwriting was small and elegant. She didn't waste time writing flourishes, but the shapes of her letters, the evenness of the spaces, all spoke of a refined life. *You'd never guess that magic lurked within the hands that wrote those words.* I drew a breath through my teeth. *Focus. You need to be ready for what comes next.*

"Are you alright?" Nieve's gentle tone floated across the chamber.

"Yes. Fine." My tone sounded like a whip in comparison to hers, and I almost winced. Her eyes flicked back to her work.

Don't bother to apologize, I told myself sternly as the inclination gnawed at me. *You'll have bigger things to apologize for soon enough.*

Slowly, we made our way through dozens of chambers, creeping deeper into the cave system little by little, the only sound the gentle scrape of

Nieve's pencils or the scuff of our boots on the cavern floor.

The queen's instructions streamed through my mind as Nieve worked and I waited for Arden's signal. My eyes flicked to the glittering flowers in her hair—the magic-suppressing comb I had been warned about. *Still there.*

“Why did you take this job? If you knew I would be included?”

I whipped my gaze toward her face and found her observing me steadily. Her eyes were large and dark, gleaming in the glow of my lantern. I swallowed heavily.

“I was ordered to go,” I replied. Her shoulders lifted slightly as she drew in a deep breath. “But I would have volunteered if I had known.”

Her eyebrows shot up in surprise. “Why?”

I hesitated. *Should I do this now? I was going to wait until Arden actually came back. But that should be any minute now.*

Her steady gaze on me was hypnotizing, drawing forth information almost against my will.

“The cartography mission is just a ruse.” I snapped my mouth shut, watching as she wrinkled her brow in confusion, her eyes dropping to the paper in front of her. She shook her head and looked back at me, her expression skeptical. My heart started to beat a little faster. *Here it comes. I'll have to tell her. And then we'll have to act. Arden better be here quick.*

“Why would my stepmother send me out into the wilds on a cartography mission if it was all just a ruse? I know your experience of family has never been... supportive, or caring, but Katharina is the one that encouraged me to this trade and trusted me with a *secret* mission. I'm her stepdaughter. Wouldn't she have told me if there was another objective?” Nieve put her sketching supplies down on the cave floor carefully, her eyes never leaving mine. They were filled with compassion and understanding, stemming from deep knowledge of my parents and siblings, of who I was—or who I used to be, of all the frustrations that boy used to face.

My heart tripped a beat as she rose from the cave floor and I was tempted—so tempted—to dive into that well of understanding. I could hear the whispers behind her words. *She would understand me. She would support me and care for me—keep all my secrets. I wasn't alone; she was in the dark here with me, and we would find a way out together.* To my surprise there was a piece of me left that rushed toward the hope she held out, like a shard of metal to a lodestone. *Just a word, just a step toward her and you*

would find home. The longing for it, for her, was overwhelming, and that very fact made me hesitate.

*But—if you did, you would stand before her once again—soul bared and heart on the line. And she would reject you. How could she not? After everything with Ritter... besides, you haven't let your emotions rule you since **that** day. No reason to start now.*

The ache in my heart cooled at that thought. Like always, I grabbed that wayward feeling—the natural instinct that went against self-preservation, against orders, against what needed to be done, and strangled it. *She thinks she understands what is going on, but she's been sheltered.* There was a naivete in her eyes that could no longer be protected. It was my job to shatter it. Now.

Instead of falling on my knees in front of her and pouring out my heart, I slung my rucksack from my back and let it fall to the floor in front of me with a thump. She followed my movements with a puzzled frown, watching as I worked open the buckle with one hand, my other still holding the lantern high.

“Do you remember what happened when Ritter was found to be a mage?” I asked her grimly, pulling open the drawstring and reaching inside to pull out a small box wrapped in oilskin cloth. I had made sure it was near the top when I packed this morning.

Nieve's face fell, the tentative hope and openness slipping away to be replaced with sorrow. “He was—he was s-sentenced to death.”

“Yes, and I volunteered to find him and carry out that sentence.”

She looked away, not able to even look at me, and wrapped her arms around her waist.

“I proved to my superiors, and my queen, when I came back with evidence of his death that I was worthy of the calling of Huntsman. And because I was willing to kill my brother in the service of my queen, I've become the most trusted Royal Huntsman in our entire unit.”

I pushed my pack to the side, gripping the box tightly and taking a heavy step toward Nieve. She didn't back away, but she didn't look at me either.

“And that's why the queen asked for me, specifically, when she ordered this mission. You see, there's another citizen who's been identified as a mage. The citizen isn't aware of it, but the magic has been verified. The

crown knows about it, and the queen has identified this person as a threat, not only to her family, but to the entire country.”

Nieve turned her gaze back toward me finally, a look of horror on her face.

“That’s right,” I answered her silent question, the tight leash I kept on my anger making my words clipped. “Our real mission is to end that threat.”

“En-end it?” she asked, her stammer echoing loudly against the cavern walls although she spoke in a whisper.

“Yes, end it.” I took another step forward. This time she backed away from me. *Smart girl*. I almost smiled, but it seemed the muscles on my face didn’t really work that way anymore.

“Apparently, this person is so powerful that they’re not only a threat, but a potential salvation too,” I continued.

A spark of hope leaped into Nieve’s eyes and she took a step toward me, half holding out her hands. “Yes! You said they didn’t even know they’re a mage. I’m sure if given a choice, they would want to help Snowdonia, not harm it! Let me talk to my stepmother. If she realizes there’s a chance they’ll help us—oh, I’m sure I can make her see reason!”

“No, no, Nieve, it’s too late for that. You see, Queen Katharina herself gave me the orders. I was handpicked for the job because of my discipline, my dedication to the crown, and my willingness to destroy those closest to me when ordered to do so.”

Nieve searched my face, agony etched in every line of her body. “Arden?” she whispered, covering her mouth with the tips of her fingers. Her eyes flicked to the passage leading back to the cave entrance, then back to me.

I took another step forward, almost closing the gap between us. “No, Nieve—you.”

A crease formed between her eyebrows, and her face went blank for a second; just a beat between when she understood that Arden would not be harmed and before she realized that *she* was the one in danger—the one abandoned by the only family she had left and placed in the arms of a man with a reputation for no morals except queen and country. Her expression pinched with real fear as she gazed up at me, like a doe who knows she’s been run down and is about to die.

“No. No, the queen—“

“The queen is beyond reason, Snow, beyond any kindness or morals.”

“That’s not true!” Nieve protested, a flicker of strength shimmering amongst the fear. “She is supremely reasonable, and kind, she’s been like a second mother to me since—“

“She ordered me to kill you in cold blood, then *carve out your heart* and bring it back to her.”

Nieve shook her head, as if to shake out my words. Her face was still pinched in fear but there was a certainty in her expression now. “I don’t know what horrors you’ve seen over the last few years. I’m sure there were many. But you’ve become unhinged. Katharina—“

“Here’s the box I was given to bring your heart back in,” I interrupted, shaking the oilskin cloth off and revealing the gleaming gold jewelry box in my hand. She didn’t look, her eyes locked with mine. The expression in them was pleading, the certainty she had felt beginning to drain away, replaced with brokenness. I pushed the jewelry box into her hands. “You might recognize it. I’m told it was a wedding present to the queen from your father.”

Slowly, with strained dignity, Nieve lowered her gaze to the box in her hands. As she looked down, gravity pulled tears from her eyes, and they landed with soft splatters on the golden lid.

“You can see it’s been worked in runes. They’ll keep the heart fresh, I’m told, until it makes its way into the Queen’s hands.”

The runes gleamed with a strange light as we both looked upon them. The strange shapes seemed to flicker in the dim light of my lantern, wriggling like maggots across the polished gold surface they marred.

“But I don’t... I don’t have magic,” Nieve whispered, uttering her one last defense against the reality she was facing. My eyes flicked to her apple blossom comb, the gems sparkling like stars against the night sky of her hair.

“You do,” Arden’s voice boomed from the entrance to the chamber we were standing in. “And as far as I’m concerned, it’s the only reason you might make it out of this mess alive.”

Nieve let out a startled gasp at his appearance, but Arden ignored her. “Come on,” he called to me, stomping over to pick up my pack and hold it open so I could put the box back inside. “I left the deer back at the entrance.” He pulled the drawstring on my pack and slung it over his

shoulder, heading back the way he came. “Don’t let her escape, or it will be all our heads on the chopping block,” he called as passed out of sight.

Nieve watched him go dumbly, her hands dangling loosely by her sides. *She’s in shock.* I shifted my lantern to my right hand and grabbed her upper arm with my left.

The touch seemed to break her out of her stupor and she whipped her head back to look at me.

“Let’s go,” I ordered, nodding toward the passage that Arden had taken. Her eyes flicked to her drawing supplies and I laughed grimly. “We’ll come back for them later if we need to. Right now we have work to do.”

The blood drained from her face and I pushed her forward, keeping my grip on her arm both to prevent her from running, and to propel her forward. I didn’t want to have to carry her dead weight if I didn’t have to.

Chapter Five

Nieve

My feet tripped over each other as Alaric propelled me into the rough stone passage that led back to the cave entrance. My thick boots kept my toes from harm, but it was all I could do to pull my skirts out of the way and keep moving forward. I filled my lungs with juddering breaths, inhaling a mix of dank air and fine stone dust. Like all Snowdonians, I knew that our nation's wealth was in our mines, but I had never actually been inside a cave before. I had always imagined them as places filled with beauty and wonder. But so far my first experience had been gray and filled with horror.

Snap out of it. The contents of this cave don't matter. You're going to die if you don't get help! Arden said something about saving me... maybe he'll help?

Alaric's firm grip on my arm and solid presence behind me reminded me of his words. *He said Katharina ordered my death. Can he be telling the truth?* My mind flashed back to Katharina's behavior toward me during the Winter Solstice celebrations. I had barely seen her the two days I had been there, but when I had, she had been normal.

Or had she? Had she really been too afraid of sickness and too busy to see me? Over the years she had become increasingly less demonstrative in her affection. I had attributed that to stress from ruling, but could it have been because she was viewing me as an ever increasing threat?

"But I'm not eligible to take the throne, even if I wanted to. Which I don't," I muttered to myself.

"That doesn't matter. She believes the magic within you is evil," Alaric rumbled in my ear, his voice as cold and smooth and emotionless as ever, "and the High Inquisitor claims that consuming your heart will provide a hedge of protection around the kingdom."

His breath tickled against my neck, the sensation grating my overwrought nerves. *Surely he wouldn't kill me.* Ritter's face flashed before my eyes. I had never known him very well, but Alaric had idolized him, talked about him with real love and affection. *Just because he once said he loved you more than life itself doesn't mean you matter to him now.* We stumbled along in silence, the only conversation between us our breathing: mine stuttered and just shy of a sob, his steady and barely audible.

When we finally spilled out into the first small chamber, I flung my hands in front of my eyes against the sudden glow of light. While I was still getting my bearings, Alaric roughly handed me off to Arden and turned toward a bundle on one side of the cavern.

I blinked up at my new captor, my brain fuzzy as I tried to think of a reason he would help me.

"Please, help," I finally gasped, twisting my head around to look at him, "he said... he said I'm a threat but I'm not! I swear it!"

Arden laughed as if I had told a witty joke, the sound stretching on and filling the cave.

"You, a threat?" He laughed again and I gaped at him, failing to see what was so funny about the situation. *Does he not understand what Alaric said to me? He seemed like he knew what was going on, but maybe he's as surprised as I am?*

The smile dropped from his lips abruptly, and he jerked me around to face him fully, grasping both my upper arms tightly. *I'll have bruises tomorrow,* some portion of my brain noted idly. My pale skin always bruised easily. Not that it would matter given what Alaric had just told me.

"The thing is, you *are* a threat really, all you royals are," Arden hissed, his breath hot against my face. "You order us around, make decisions for rich and poor alike, and you take, take, *take*—take our land, our money, our people, our very *souls* and say it's for the good of the country."

I snapped my mouth shut, breathing through my nose to try and stem the rising tide of panic. His eyes were wide-set and wild, fury coursing through every fiber of his being, but I didn't know why.

"I'm not a mage! I would know it!" I panted, trying to attack what had to be the source of his disgust for me. The rage that had been in his eyes flipped off in an instant, and the slightly unhinged laugh was back.

“Of course you are. And like I said before, it’s that, and the fact that Alaric has vouched for you, that means I’m willing to help—for his sake, not yours. If it were up to me, it would be you over there instead of the deer, and Alaric’s cover would stay intact.”

His words jumbled together in my head, their meaning coming to me in dribs and drabs. *Alaric is protecting me? They keep insisting I have magic, and at this point I almost wish I did! Then I could use it to get out of here.*

I craned my head to look over at where Alaric was still hunched over something. After a second I realized it was the deer Arden had mentioned. A stag with an impressive set of antlers lay in front of him, glassy eyed and lifeless. “Wha-what are you doing?” I asked Alaric’s back. He was working with quick movements, but I couldn’t see what was happening.

Arden spun me around so I could see more clearly. “In your place, he’s butchering the deer I killed, carving out its heart in an attempt to fool our beloved queen. Did you know that a deer heart resembles a human heart so closely that they’re easily confused?”

How does he know that? I shivered violently, provoking another lighthearted chuckle from Arden.

“Feeling sorry for the deer? As I said, we could easily substitute you back in. Still, the deer is already dead, so we may as well continue as we’ve begun.”

“Enough,” Alaric said over his shoulder as he wiped his hands against the damp wall of rock in front of him. There was water seeping over the rock face, not enough to create a real stream, but enough that he was able to wipe away most of the gore and finish the job with a nearby cloth. “It’s done.” He walked over to Arden, golden box in his hand. I couldn’t take my eyes off of it, knowing the gruesome object inside, and even more horrifying, knowing it was a substitute for my own.

“Here,” he said, offering the box to Arden, who released me in order to take it. In a flash, Alaric had gripped my upper arm with his right hand again, tugging me next to him.

“Now, you just watched me carve the heart out of the chest, so you can tell them you saw it with your own eyes. And I’m telling you now to leave me so I can commit an honor sacrifice and cleanse myself of the stain of my actions in peace. So you can repeat my words to them in truth too.”

Arden tucked the jewelry box by his side and nodded, then gripped Alaric's shoulder. "It's been an honor. You know how to make contact if you find a way to continue the work. I'll miss having you by my side."

Alaric gripped him back, still anchoring me to his side with his other arm. "And you by mine. I'll find a way to advance our cause, by stealth or strength. But you won't see me again." He slapped Arden's shoulder and they released each other.

"Good, because I'll either have to kill you or be killed, and I don't like those choices."

Alaric grunted what could have been a laugh. "Or we could go out together against our enemies, in a blaze of glory."

"Now *that*, I could stomach," Arden laughed, sketching the approximation of a bow to my captor, then yelping and holding the jewelry box out in front of him. "It's leaking! Ugh, I don't want deer blood leaking on me for the next week."

"It's *her* blood," Alaric reminded him, tipping his chin in my direction. "The more you can convince yourself of our cover story, the more you'll believe it and the easier it will be to pass a truth test if they put one on you."

"I don't want *her* blood dripping on me for the next week either," he corrected himself. *He's oddly fussy for someone who just told me with no shame that it would be easier on him if I just agreed to die so he wouldn't have to say goodbye to Alaric.* Huffing a sigh, Arden pressed the box back to his side with one hand and picked up his lantern with the other. "Don't forget about the hair comb," he said, nodding at my head.

I put my free hand up to my hair to touch the beautiful apple blossom comb my stepmother had given me years ago and bid me to always wear. In a blink, Arden was gone, so I turned to Alaric, a fuzzy bemusement over recent events making me thick-headed. "What's wrong with my comb?"

With a swift motion, Alaric plucked it from my head and threw it to the floor, grinding it beneath his boot with a crunch.

"No!" I gasped, reaching out toward it, but he tugged me back just as a flash of light erupted beneath his heel.

"It was spelled to suppress your magic," he said, staring at me implacably as tears started spilling down my cheeks. "Arden said they might use it to track us if we left it alone."

I shook my head, unable to speak. I didn't know why I was crying, really. It's true that I had always loved that beautiful comb, but in light of everything else that had happened and my uncertain future, it didn't really matter. Especially since that flash of light meant it did indeed contain some sort of spellwork. *It's all been too sudden, too cruel.*

"So-so now what?" I stuttered tiredly, the fear that had been pumping through my heart beginning to settle into a sort of cotton wool feeling in my limbs. "If that was suppressing my magic, are you waiting to see what manifests and then kill me like you did Ritter?"

Alaric let go of my arm to scoop up his pack and settle it on his back before picking up the two remaining lanterns, holding one out to me. "I didn't kill Ritter, and I'm not going to kill you."

I stared at him in a final wave of shock. *He didn't kill Ritter? But he told me so himself.* He placed the handle of the lantern in my nerveless hand and curled my fingers around it until I took it reflexively.

"You didn't... you said... but who did then?"

"No one. I faked his death and smuggled him out of the country. And that's what I'm going to do with you," he replied, his tone as cool as if he was announcing his intention to go on an afternoon walk.

An overwhelming swell of emotion welled up from deep in my chest, coming out as a choking sob. I dropped my lantern and stood on tiptoes to fling my arms around him and bury my face in his neck. We almost knocked foreheads as he stooped to catch my lantern with his free hand, snagging it just before it hit the ground.

He froze, stooped over and off balance from the pack on his back and my weight around his neck, awkwardly holding the lights in his hands out for balance. I leaned against him, knowing I needed to let go but feeling almost too dizzy to stand. He didn't move, either to push me away or pull me closer. He simply stood, stooped over, and allowed me to sob against him, taking deep shuddering breaths of his sage and leather and sweat and blood smell—blood he had spilled in place of mine.

"Thank you," I whispered, my lips grazing the stubble on his jaw accidentally. He swallowed heavily, the motion making the stubble graze me back. The rasp of it on my lips sent a jolt of awareness through me and I released him suddenly, sending him off balance again so he rocked backward. I grabbed his forearms with mine, helping him stay upright.

“Sorry,” I said meekly, taking my lantern back once I was sure he wouldn’t fall and taking a step away to put some space between us.

He straightened up and shook his head. “We need to leave,” he said quietly, glancing at the passage leading deeper into the cave system.

“Can we get my sketching supplies? I’m assuming we can’t go back to camp for my pack,” I replied, thinking mournfully of the change of clothes and other essentials that were back amongst the Huntsmen.

“No, I have what we need. And your sketching supplies are on the way to the other exit, so come on,” he replied, grabbing my upper arm again.

I wrenched it away from him, or at least I tried. “I won’t run,” I insisted, and at another tug from me, he let me go. After a moment of hesitation, I held my hand out to him. He snorted a little breath and took it, making my cheeks flame in embarrassment as he tugged me along behind him deeper into the caves. *Does he think I’m flirting with him? I’m just tired of being dragged around by my arm.* If I was honest though, the feel of his large hand gripping mine as we slipped through the shadowy caverns was more of a distraction than I wanted to admit.

Chapter Six

Alaric

We traced our way through the cave system methodically. They were extensive, but I knew most of the passages from memory, having used them at various times over the years to meet contacts or hand off mages to be smuggled out of the country. We stopped briefly to pack up Nieve's sketching supplies. She muttered to herself as she placed each pencil in its spot and rolled the papers into the waterproof tubes. I helped her lift the pack onto her back. It wasn't terribly heavy, but I suspected she would want to be rid of it in a few days' time. I wouldn't want to carry a load of patently useless items on my back through the forest in winter.

After she settled the pack comfortably between her shoulders, she turned to look at me, a question in her eyes about our next step. It was a pathetically vulnerable expression, lost and tired, and full of so much trust it almost physically hurt me. *She's too ingenuous. For all she knows Arden and I lied about the whole thing and I'm kidnapping her for some other reason. But that hasn't even occurred to her. Or maybe she's just too tired to think straight. I suppose I should be grateful either way since it's making her compliant. Especially since I **am** actually trying to help her.* I held out my hand and she took it wordlessly, her touch another token of trust that lay uncomfortably with my cynical heart.

It took at least an hour to work our way through to the western exit of the caves. To my relief, Nieve didn't complain at all even though she was visibly running out of energy from the stresses of the day. She moved slowly but steadily, squeezing through narrow passages, accepting my help to climb down a short underground cliff face at one point near the end of our journey, and jumping across a series of precarious rocks to get to the

other side of a broad, shallow stream. This exit ended in a long, low cavern that looked fully west at the setting sun.

“Where next?” she asked dully, as we stood at the entrance, watching the orange-red orb sink behind scraggly pine trees. I dropped her hand abruptly and motioned back toward the cave.

“We’ll sleep in here tonight. There’s no sense walking in the dark when there’s no one on our trail. We’d risk injury or worse.” I snuck a glance at Nieve, who looked relieved.

We spent the next hour starting a fire using some of the firewood stored in the mouth of the cave. Like any good Huntsmen, Arden and I, and our compatriots, kept this hideout stocked for just such a situation as this. After eating a hasty dinner, I pulled out some of the meat I had carved off of the deer back in the cave and began slicing it into thin strips and hanging it to smoke over the fire. Nieve stared at it, looking green around the gills. I almost shared the sentiment. It felt slightly wrong to be eating the animal whose heart we were pretending was hers. But we had a long journey ahead of us and couldn’t afford to waste a good energy source.

A wave of confusion disrupted my quiet exhaustion as Nieve settled down at the campfire next to me when she was done with her dinner, grabbing a long stick and giving me a shrug.

“I don’t think I can sleep in there alone. And it’s warmer here by the fire. I can help.” She nodded to the red hot bed of embers I was monitoring to make sure the meat smoked evenly. The venison was very lean, but every so often a bit of fat would drop into the fire and make it flare up, or the embers would get a little too low and I’d need to add some fuel. She watched me for some time and then began helping whenever there was a problem within her reach.

“Where will we go tomorrow?” she asked quietly after a time, drawing swirling designs in the ash at the edge of the fire.

I drew in a controlled breath, knowing she wasn’t going to like the answer. “We’ll head south, following some tracks in the forest that I know.”

“But where can we go? We’re both well known figures. Is there a place far enough away from the capitol that we can live unnoticed?” She hunched her shoulders. “I don’t think I can live always looking over my shoulder and wondering if someone is coming.”

“You’re right. There’s nowhere in Snowdonia that will be safe for us. Even if we lived in the wilds, a stray trapper or a Huntsman on patrol could stumble across us.”

An image of the two of us in a snug cottage somewhere high in the eastern mountains popped into my head, but I pushed it away ferociously. *That’s not what she means. That was always a fairytale.*

“Where then? Where did you take Ritter?”

I sighed. “I took Ritter to Spindle, but that was different. I had more help—and there was transport arranged that made it all easier. Right now, we’d be mad to try and go there. We’d have to cross Pelerine or Charmagne, and neither country is safe for the likes of us. In the dead of winter, we’d be easily visible, and going on foot would be slow.” I shook my head. “There’s only one option, Nieve. The Dwarven Republic.”

“No!” she cried hoarsely, turning to me in alarm. “Anywhere but there! They killed my father—I couldn’t stand to go there!”

I stared into the fire rather than meet her eyes, coughing as the wind shifted slightly, bringing a wisp of smoke with it. “I have contacts there that will give us sanctuary—*not* ones that would have been involved with the plot against your father.” I risked a glance, but she was staring at the embers too, pain written on her features. “I promise if you don’t like it, I’ll help you get to Spindle in the spring. It won’t be easy, but we’ll have time to prepare. And besides, once the suppression spell wears off and your magic starts coming in, I’m guessing you’ll want to be near people who know how to help you with it.”

She worried her bottom lip with her teeth, staring at the fire instead of looking at me. *Why do you care if she’s upset with you? Going to the Republic is the only option, whether she’s happy about it or not. Get a grip, Alaric.*

Finally she nodded, hugging her knees close to her chest. “Obviously I’ll have to defer to your knowledge. The only friends I have are at Asylbrunn, and I imagine we can’t go back there?” She glanced at me and I shook my head, a dart of sympathy going through me at the expression of loss on her face.

There was nothing to say. I had loved Asylbrunn too, years ago before she had pushed me away. It had been a safe haven in my world, a place to get away from my parents’ abuse or the cares of helping with my father’s

work. But without Nieve, it would be lifeless, and if she went back there, she'd die. *No sense being sentimental about it. Focus on what's right in front of you.*

A warm body settled at my side, surprising me so much I almost jumped. The part of my brain that was always processing what was happening around me had noted Nieve's gentle movements, but I had been so distracted by my own thoughts and watching the fire that I hadn't noticed she was coming closer until she actually leaned against me.

"He's really alive?" she whispered, laying her head against my shoulder.

My throat felt strangely thick as I looked down at the top of her head. Her coal-black hair had started the day twisted into a low bun at the nape of her neck. By now, most of it had fallen out and was laying in tangled streamers down her back. My fingers itched with an urge to comb through the knots for her, to feel the silky weight of each strand as it slipped through my hand. I blinked. *You're more tired than you think.* I wrenched my thoughts back to the present.

"You mean Ritter?" I asked and she nodded her head. "As far as I know he's fine. I haven't had contact with him since I left him in Spindle. He planned on joining their military, so if he's been to war at the Wasteland, he may be dead by now." My words sounded flat, but they hid a depth of sadness I felt in regards to my brother. *Once Nieve is settled, maybe I can go find him again.* Suddenly the dark of the evening seemed a little less heavy.

Nieve's breathing deepened, and after a minute, I realized she had fallen asleep. A grunt of surprise escaped me, and I shook my head. "Too trusting by a half," I muttered, then focused back on the meat. I let it smoke for several more hours, settling Nieve's head onto my lap when she shifted in her sleep.

Once the meat was done, I covered the remains of the fire and packed away the food. She still hadn't woken up, so I prepared the only bedroll we had in the cave, and carried her to it, squeezing us both onto the ground mat and spreading the wool blanket, canvas cover, and both of our cloaks over the top. Then I lived a fantasy I had given up on ten years ago—falling asleep with Nieve in my arms.

Chapter Seven

Nieve

A week passed in slow motion after the day and night in the caves. We kept to the trees, taking care to stay on paths that Alaric seemed to know, but I couldn't see. You'd think I'd be able to see a path that's under my feet.

As a cartographer, I had been trained to notice areas of regular human disturbance, so I could mark them on maps I was making or updating. It's true that I hadn't really used my trade since I finished school five years ago, but I had kept up to date by making extensive maps of the area around my house, layering different surveys to coordinate different collections of information. *He must be following a different sort of path, using markers instead of a track.*

I glanced at his broad back, shoulders straight even under the weight of his pack as he forged our quiet way forward. *Could he be using magic somehow?* I shook my head. He wasn't a mage. He had said as much around the campfire one night as we discussed a person he knew in the Republic that could help once my magic came in since he didn't have any. *If it came in.* I shied away from that thought. Whether I had magic or not, my stepmother had ordered my death. *It might be worse if it turns out I don't have magic, and she made that up as an excuse to... get rid of me.*

I felt oddly detached about all the changes that had happened to me: realizing my stepmother wanted to kill me, knowing I could never go back to my brothers or Nanny, realizing that my childhood best friend wasn't the monster he had claimed to be but was some sort of hero who smuggled mages out of the country, the fact that *I* was a mage and was waiting for my actual magical ability to come in. Somehow, apart from all of that trauma, it was Arden's strange attitude that haunted me most viscerally.

Arden had been quite clear that he would have *preferred* to kill me, not because I was a mage, but because I was a royal. *I don't take. I always try to give anywhere I see a need. I certainly don't live opulently at court... and the only reason Katharina and the boys do is because it's what's expected and needed to maintain their authority.* My face went hot as I realized I was defending the same family that wanted to kill me. *Well, not the boys. Except—is Barrett old enough to be sitting in on meetings with the High Inquisitor?* I shuddered. By our laws, he was almost old enough. We entered real training for our trades at sixteen, and he was fifteen. I hoped he wasn't though. I had never liked the High Inquisitor's secretiveness and zeal. Something had always seemed rotten about him, but I could never place what.

If it turns out you're a mage, maybe it was your dormant magic reacting to his dedication to cleansing our country of it. A squeak escaped me as I took an extra long step over a tree root, my knee wobbling as my feet skidded against the mix of snow and pine needles. I didn't fall, but I dislodged some stones which alerted Alaric to my mishap.

"Are you alright?" he asked softly. Everything he did was quiet in the woods. I thought I was being quiet too, but he instructed me almost every night on ways to be more silent as I walked, or talked, or *breathed* for that matter.

"I'm fine. My foot just slid out from under me a bit."

He frowned down at my feet as if his look could scold them into supporting me better. *Maybe it can. I certainly don't want that look directed at me.*

"I'll slow down a little. We've covered a lot of ground today, and there's a hollow we can shelter in that isn't far.

"No, it's fine. Honestly, I don't need a break. We can continue on," I assured him. I hated that he thought I was weak, even if, compared to him, I was. And even if ending our ceaseless hike for the day really *did* sound nice.

Danger! Hide!

I whipped my head around at the whispered words. "Did you hear that?!" I hissed at Alaric, crouching as if it would help me not be seen.

He took four quick steps back and tugged me behind a nearby tree, crouching low as well as he scanned the trees for any sign of life. "What

was it?” he breathed, almost inaudibly. He pulled an arrow out of the quiver attached to his pack, unhooking his bow from where it hung at the same time.

I put my hand on his back, steadying myself physically and mentally. “I don’t know,” I whispered back. “I guess it sounded like a man—but it could have been a child too I suppose. What did you think?”

His head whipped in my direction. “You heard a person?” he demanded, somehow making his words heard clearly with very little sound.

“Didn’t you?!” I whispered back, the sound harsh in the still forest.

He shook his head, then went back to scanning our surroundings. “What direction did it come from?”

I thought for a minute but was at a loss. “I... I don’t know. Maybe I imagined it.”

Alaric didn’t react, merely continued looking and listening to our surroundings. I tried my hardest to stay still. *Why is my breathing so loud? I’m not even moving.* I was so focused on trying not to make any noise while I breathed that I almost fell over in shock when Alaric suddenly stood up again. His hand shot out to steady me, gripping me by my forearm. He pulled me up in a smooth motion, staring at me with a furrowed brow.

“I’m fine,” I breathed, out of breath from the shock of being pulled onto my feet and the fact that I had been partially holding my breath as I tried to be quieter.

“It doesn’t look like there’s anyone out there, but let me know if you hear anything else.”

I nodded, and he turned away again, padding silently ahead. I winced as my boots crunched on the ever-present layer of pine needles. *Hopefully that stream I can hear nearby is covering the sound of me walking if there is anyone nearby.*

Pale yellow sunlight filtered its way shyly through the pine trees surrounding us. After several days staying hidden in the forest, I longed to see a wide open sky again. I never noticed how claustrophobic a forest could be before. My days had been spent on my little estate or penned in by man-made walls at the castle. *It’s not the trees that are making you claustrophobic, it’s the feeling that you can’t step outside them or you’ll be in danger.*

Suddenly, Alaric halted again, throwing out a silent hand signaling me to be still. I froze, my breath billowing in white clouds in front of my face. *Not only am I breathing too loud but too visibly too! I'm basically a walking signal for our location.* The monotony of our last few days combined with my rapidly rebuilding trust in Alaric had dulled my senses, but as I scanned the path in front of him, I spotted a patch of gray which sent a rush of fear swept from my head to my toes.

Growling hit my ears as my brain registered what I was seeing. "A wolf!" I gasped, all the breath in my lungs leaving in a whoosh.

"Stay behind me. Don't move unless I say so," Alaric instructed, not taking his eyes off the monster in front of us. "It probably isn't alone, so I need you to do exactly as I say when I say it. Do you understand?"

I nodded, then squeaked out a shaky "yes" when I realized he wouldn't be able to see me agreeing.

Everything happened in a slow smooth haze after that. Alaric seemed to grow larger somehow, holding his hands out, and pulling an arrow out of his quiver again in the blink of an eye. He had been carrying his unloaded crossbow in one hand still, and I willed him to put the arrow on his bow and shoot it. *Will the wolf attack if he tries to move?*

My mouth was dry as I tried to swallow, almost making me choke. My eyes seemed dry too, and I kept blinking, wanting to block out the sight in front of me but not daring to take my eyes off of the monster.

Threat. Weak one. Kill.

Three disconnected thoughts passed through my fractured mind. I felt as if my thoughts weren't even my own—as if the entire scenario playing out in front of us was just a dream I was having. Scary, horrible, but not *real*.

The snarl of the wolf increased in volume and my breaths started coming out in choking sobs. *What is with me and breathing today? It's the most basic thing, but I can't seem to get it right.*

I coughed in fright as Alaric growled back and yelled, "Go! Go away! You won't win here!"

Another minute, or ten, or maybe a day later, and the wolf stopped growling. I dared to pull in a deep breath, and when nothing happened, I tipped my head to one side to see better around Alaric's torso.

The wolf was much closer than I had realized. Its tail was between its legs, but although it wasn't making a noise, its muzzle was still peeled back

in a snarl. Its teeth entranced me, huge and sharp and dirty. I could feel them ripping into my flesh. *Would they tear out my throat first or bite my legs?*

Fear glazed over my eyes and I heard someone sobbing. *Weak one!* a voice accused in my head, and I stumbled backward, trying to get away from death.

The wolf moved in a flurry of gray fur and yellow teeth, all anger and violence. Out of the corner of my eye I saw Alaric move wordlessly, and a second later, as the wolf crossed the distance between us, I saw an arrow bury itself into the wolf's side.

They must be an alpha pair—but she's so weak! an angry voice echoed in my head loudly. I slipped on a pile of slushy snow and landed on my rear, another loud, shaky sob escaping me as the earth jarred against my wrist and one elbow. I began scrabbling backward, a sharp slice of pain shooting up the wrist I had landed on, but even as the wolf staggered forward, Alaric moved again. His grayish brown cape swirled around him, blending perfectly with the wolf's hide. Alaric's teeth were bared as he and the wolf snarled at each other, both predators in a wild dance I didn't understand.

He's one of the ones—the ones with extra claws. Another angry thought bounced around my mind. *They take and kill and don't eat. Bite him, tear his throat and kill the other. Kill or be killed!*

The voice in my head—I swear it wasn't mine—cut off suddenly, and I watched in horror as Alaric pulled his knife out of the wolf's neck, a fountain of blood following in its wake.

"Are you alright?!" Alaric called, the only marker of emotion on his face a deep frown as he spared me a glance before scanning the trees around us.

I nodded again, or organized my trembling head into a series of motions that resembled a nod, before realizing he couldn't see that again.

"Ye-yes. I just fell," I replied, watching Alaric as if the mere sight of him would keep me safe. *If I don't look away, nothing else will exist.*

"I don't see any other wolves, but they usually live in packs, so we need to get out of here. Can you walk?"

I nodded, then shakily pushed myself to my feet, almost falling as my wrist gave out a little, but in the end I managed it.

Hide. Be still. Not safe.

Another voice bounced around my mind. I shook my head against it. *What is happening to me?* Those thoughts or voices or whatever they were scared me. *Maybe I'm losing my mind. Too much has happened, and I'm overwhelmed. Can you start hearing things when that happens?*

"Come on," Alaric urged, jarring me back to the present. "There's an old mine up ahead. One of the guard shacks hasn't completely fallen down, so we can stay there tonight. Let's move."

We ended up running there, although I had no idea how long it took. As we ran, snatches of words and sentences bounced around my brain. *Danger! Something's coming! Fly!* The words came from different directions, almost as if I was hearing sounds with my ears, but there was no one there to speak. It sounded as if I was in the middle of a crowd.

At last we rounded a massive pine tree and found an overgrown clearing. Right in front of the pine tree was a tumbled down one-room building. The roof had caved in on one part, but the rest of it looked, if not sturdy, then as if it would hold for the night. Surprisingly, the door hadn't rotted away, although the hinges squeaked loudly enough to startle several birds as it opened. As soon as Alaric closed the door we turned to each other and asked at the same time, "Are you hurt?"

Under other circumstances, I would have laughed, but my heart was beating too quickly and my fear had spiked too high. I went to him with trembling hands. "Are you sure you're not hurt?"

He shook his head no, and everything in me crumpled. I took one more step and practically collapsed against his chest. He anchored me to him with one hand, fumbling to set down the crossbow he still held with his other, then awkwardly sank to the dirt floor, half pulling me into his lap and encircling me with his other arm.

I felt raw and broken, too vulnerable to even speak coherently. Any embarrassment I might have felt was brushed aside as I realized Alaric's hand was trembling as he cradled my head and whispered into my hair. I didn't even try to hear the words he was saying. If they were admonishments, I couldn't bear the weight of his disappointment right now. If they were nervous ramblings, then I didn't need to hear. If he was telling me the plan for the evening and the next day, it didn't matter—I'd follow whatever instructions he had meekly, so long as he was okay. And I didn't dare, couldn't allow myself to even *guess* that they might be sweet

nothings. If they were, I knew they were the result of a narrow shave and would float away, meaningless, in a few moments. It was enough that he cared enough despite his stony exterior to whisper whatever it was and let me cling to him. I simply existed, letting his whispers and his heartbeat anchor me to the present as the world swirled around us.

Eventually, our breathing slowed, and the heat from running to our shelter began to wear off, leaving us in a cold cocoon on a rapidly darkening day. Alaric had left off whatever he had been saying ages ago, although stray words seemed to bounce around my head from time to time. A growing certainty finally blossomed in my heart, and I pulled slightly away from Alaric, tipping off his lap and wiping my face with my sleeve before looking up at him.

“I... I think my magic is coming in,” I said hesitantly, hoping he didn’t think I was crazy. *You probably are crazy. It doesn’t matter anymore, though. Who will care if a strange orphan girl is crazy? By all rights I **should** be crazy.*

“What do you mean? Can you feel it?” He searched my eyes with his, and my heart skipped a beat as I tried to find the words to explain it.

“I can’t feel it... more like hear it? In my head?”

One of his brows lifted in confusion or skepticism and I felt my cheeks heat instantly. I pressed my hands on either side of my face, trying to hide my blush and maybe hold myself together at the same time.

“I don’t know how to say this, but I think... I think I can hear animals talking.”

Chapter Eight

Alaric

“You’re getting better,” I murmured to Nieve as we sat next to each other, eating the last of the smoked venison for our midday meal.

She broke off concentrating on the bird whistle she was practicing to smile at me, before wincing and starting back up again. As she did, she glanced down at the meat in her hand and grimaced.

“What’s wrong? Can’t stop whistling long enough to eat?”

She glanced over at me with a forced smile. “No—I mean it’s definitely getting loud in my head when I stop whistling but it’s more...” her eyes glazed over for a second before she shook her head and re-focused on me. “I keep hearing the deer talk to each other. It seems wrong to eat something that can talk,” she finished with an apologetic smile.

I opened my mouth to argue—after all, she needed to eat to live, and the venison was not only what we had on hand but a good source of energy for the rest of our grueling trip, but she forestalled it by taking a reluctant bite. As she turned away, I could tell she was trying not to spit it out.

I left it alone. She was trying. *And it’s not like I can really understand what having dozens of animals talking in your head would be like anyway.*

Following her startling revelation after the wolf attack the other night, and after confirming she wasn’t hearing people nearby or losing her mind, the animal voices quickly became louder and more numerous. At first she was only hearing ones that were very angry or agitated—their voices were loud enough to be carried along by her magic, or that was the theory we came up with. But as if it were a dam breaking, her magic started pulling more and more voices her way, not just animals caught in life or death situations, but those going about their business or taking care of their young.

The more voices that started echoing in her head, the more distracted Nieve became. Last night at the campfire, she started singing under her breath and discovered that it practically cleared her head of all the outside voices.

“Well anyway, I’m glad you’re happy to practice the bird whistles. As much as I love your singing we can’t afford to draw the attention of anyone else who happens to be in the forest right now.”

Nieve nodded and shoved the rest of the venison in her mouth, chewing quickly and almost choking as she swallowed.

“There’s a family of deer just over there,” she whispered after taking a swig of water to wash the rest of the meat down.

I turned my head but couldn’t see them. “If you can stay here for a minute I’ll go get one for the road. This spot is as good as any to camp for the night, and I could smoke the—” I broke off at her strangled cry.

“No! That’s not what I—I don’t think I can eat any more meat, Alaric.” A few tears escaped the sudden pools of water in her eye, surprising me with the depth of emotion she had. “There is a mother deer over there...” she broke off, staring in misery at me with eyes larger than the moon.

“Well obviously I wouldn’t hunt a pregnant doe, I just thought—” I broke off too as she turned away.

“It doesn’t matter,” I tried to reassure her. I felt awkward every time I tried to help. “I have some hardtack left, and of course I’m trained to find roots and things, even in the middle of winter.”

She nodded, her back still turned toward me, and I watched as her hands crept up to her ears, only to be snatched away again as she started practicing one of the beginner bird whistle sounds I taught her.

I got up slowly, giving my cramped back and legs time to remember what standing felt like, then muscled my pack back on my shoulders. Nieve’s stuttering whistle still didn’t sound much like any real birds I had ever heard, but it must have been helping her. *Although it also seems like her magic is getting harder to control—she hardly stops whistling to even breathe.*

I let out a gust of air and started forward, looking back briefly to make sure Nieve was following before focusing back on the landmarks that guided our path.

I'll have to make a decision soon about what to do. I glanced at the enormous mountain range to our left. It was still a long way off, but it loomed over the landscape. Originally I had planned to lead Nieve on a path I knew that wound through the range, and would drop us neatly over the border into the Dwarven Republic. It was slow going, and had its dangers, but was safe enough as long as we didn't get a major snowstorm at a tricky spot.

Adjusting the straps on my pack as I crunched across our current snowy path, my eyes darted back and forth, scanning our surroundings by rote instinct as I mulled over our situation.

"It's getting worse, isn't it?" I asked, stopping and turning around to look at Nieve who was a few steps behind.

She slowed to a stop as well, still whistling broken trills, and nodded reluctantly. "There's just so many of them..." she started but trailed off, sliding her gaze to one side of the trail. I followed suit, peering between the trunks of scaly pine trees. My eyes hit upon a hare, tucked almost unseen in a pile of gray hued snow.

Nieve's whistle trilled out in an off-key sortie, startling the hare, which took off with an annoyed thump.

"Right," I replied and turned to lead us forward once more, adjusting our course slightly away from the mountains and more toward the even more distant coastline. *Nieve will never survive a long journey on foot. We need to get to mages that can help her as soon as possible. And that means crossing the strait by boat.* My hands tightened on my shoulder straps once again. Crossing the strait would bring its own dangers, especially in the middle of winter. *I should have left that comb alone—at least until we got to Entfesholt.*

Later that night, Nieve lay as close to the campfire as she dared on our shared mat, attempting to braid her hair and singing endless rounds of lullabies in a low, hoarse voice.

“Here,” I called softly, sitting down next to her on the bedroll. “Lay down facing the fire. I remember how to braid well enough.”

She complied without protest, weariness falling off of her in waves. “Do you remember how to sing, by chance?” she asked in a hollow voice, before clearing her throat.

“No.” I settled more comfortably behind her, beginning to comb out some of the tangles in the dark mass of shadow on her head. “But I can whistle, if it helps.”

“It did the other day, when you were teaching me the bird calls.”

I began to whistle, starting out with the tunes to simple nursery rhymes as I tried to *actually* remember how to braid hair. Nieve had taught me decades ago, but I hadn’t used the skill since we last parted ways. It didn’t seem to matter to her though. Between my unembellished, but mercifully on-key, whistling and the care I was taking in untangling the knots in her hair, her shoulders quickly un-tensed, and her breathing became more even.

“Now *this* one is actually halfway decent!” I announced proudly a little while later, quickly resuming my whistling as I leaned over Nieve to show her the braid I had completed. Instead of acknowledging my prowess, her eyes remained closed, the corners her ruby red lips drooping in a small frown, and tiny wrinkles ghosting her ivory forehead. I broke off whistling and set her braid down across her shoulder.

The splashing of rapids reached my ears, sparking a ray of hope in my mind. *We must be close to the rendezvous point. I just hope it’s a day that someone is nearby.*

I had never actually traveled this far south. I only knew about the smuggling rendezvous point from descriptions I heard while directing rescued mages along the first leg of their escape. I *had* met the Dwarven handler that ran their part of smuggling operations, Bernadine, several times. If I remembered correctly, she monitored the tumbledown shack that

served as the last hiding point for mages before crossing to the Dwarven Republic.

“The shack is located near a stretch of rapids—supposedly there’s only one major set of rapids in the straight, so it should be close,” I whispered to Nieve.

I don’t know why I bothered. She was sitting next to me, leaning against my shoulder for support and clutching her head in agony. Although my voice was probably the only one she was hearing with her ears, it was surely being drowned out by the hundreds of animals all around us.

I heaved a sigh, crouching to pull Nieve’s arms around my neck and then standing and waiting for a moment as she fumbled to nestle her feet in the loose straps of my pack, which I wore in front. She mumbled slightly as she got comfortable. *I hope it isn’t harder for her if she can’t put her hands to her ears. Not that I would imagine that actually helps.* I refrained from shrugging as I started forward. *At this point, we just need to move forward, whatever the cost.*

Our progress had been a snail’s pace the last few days as the cacophony grew intolerable. After she had tripped over three roots and run into two trees in the space of ten minutes, I had called a stop. Going through the contents of my pack, I jettisoned everything that wasn’t absolutely essential for the next few days, crammed Nieve’s smaller drawing supplies kit into the extra space, and then pulled her over my shoulder. I knew she was completely overwhelmed when she hadn’t even commented on the change in traveling arrangements.

Unfortunately, our change in destination had meant she couldn’t risk whistling or singing to distract herself. The only time she had any relief was when we camped at night. Usually she sang while I prepared our food, and then I sang her to sleep to the best of my ability. The only songs I knew were a few marching cadences from military training and half-remembered lullabies from when we were children. She never seemed to mind whichever I happened to choose, or how badly I sang.

A stab of pain shot down my lower back, answered by a dull ache in my knee as I stepped into an unexpected dip in the ground.

“Mage blood,” I cursed, then cursed again in my mind. I was used to using that sort of language to keep up my image as a mage-hating

Huntsman in Snowdonia. Now I was on the doorstep of the Dwarven Republic. They wouldn't take kindly to those sentiments.

I tightened my grip on Nieve's arms and glanced back to make sure she was okay. A flicker caught my eye "How did I pass it?" I muttered under my breath, stopping and staring at the tumbledown shack behind me. After a quick look around, I turned back, heading directly toward the cabin, which had a clear path to the front door.

"Tell me it was magic," I grumbled. "If I missed an entire shack with a path leading to it in the middle of a barren woodland, then a decade of Huntsman training was for naught.

A gust of wind struck up as I put my foot on the weathered wooden porch, scraping across my skin and swirling pieces of Nieve's hair around briefly. My eyes instantly watered at the bitter cold and when I blinked to clear them, the door to the shack stood open.

My jaw dropped open, and my teeth ached as I drew in a surprised breath of cold air. I snapped them shut and relaxed as I recognized who stood in front of me.

"Bernadine," I greeted her. "Tell me you used magic to hide this place just now."

She cracked a smile on her prematurely lined face. "Yes. I let the shielding spell down after you tripped the alarm."

My face was too frozen to smile so I nodded my acknowledgement. Bernadine's eyes slid to Nieve and she grimaced, taking a step back into the dark cabin and holding the door open.

As I passed through, my eyebrows shot up in surprise. Instead of a dark, drafty shack, the second we stepped across the threshold, we were washed in warmth—warm air, warm light, and the scent of warm, freshly made bread.

The door snicked shut gently behind us as Bernadine passed by, motioning to a worn couch shoved against one wall. "You can lay her down over there. Does she need a healer?"

"No, I don't think so," I answered as I paced across the room. Turning awkwardly, I managed to lay Nieve down onto the couch, prying her hands from around my neck and disentangling her feet from my pack without disturbing whatever semi-conscious dream state she was in. I dropped my

pack to the floor by her side and stretched my aching shoulders as I walked back to Bernadine. *I could use a healer after the last few days, honestly.*

“She’s a mage refugee I’m assuming?” Bernadine interrupted my thoughts.

I nodded. “She’s only just come into her magic in the last few days and is completely overwhelmed by it. Can you help her?”

A frown formed between Bernadine’s eyebrows, her intelligent dark eyes casting a worried look at Nieve. “Just came in? That’s highly unusual. She has to be in her twenties at least!”

“She’s twenty-six,” I replied, swallowing heavily. *She’s twenty-six and a fully grown woman. Far from the girl I used to know.* But the last week, before her magic had begun to take over her mind, it had almost seemed like no time had passed since we last knew each other. She was the same old Nieve, beautiful, intelligent, ingenuous. And my heart was sixteen again, full of her and determined to protect her from the darker side this life could inflict.

“If she’s twenty-six, something must have been suppressing her magic. It should have come in ages ago. No wonder she’s struggling.”

“Do you have a spell or something that could help?” I repeated, trying not to let my desperation show in my voice.

“Not really,” Bernadine sighed, crossing her wiry arms over her chest. “How has it presented?”

I hesitated a moment, the oddness of the conversation giving me pause even though I knew I was speaking to a mage who was used to stranger things than I was about to say. “She said she thinks she can hear animals talking,” I admitted finally.

“Really?” Bernadine asked, whipping her head up at me.

I shrugged. “That’s what she said. Just one at first—a lone wolf we encountered. But soon after that, she started hearing more and more, and for the last few days, she’s barely been able to speak or do anything.” I cast a worried glance over at the couch as Nieve shifted restlessly. “We figured out early on that singing or whistling helped quiet the voices, but we weren’t able to do much of that once we crossed into Charmagnian territory.”

Bernadine nodded. “Well, I’m not much of a musician, but I could probably spell her to sleep for a time, if you think that would help.”

I nodded, following Bernadine as she crossed over to Nieve. She placed her hand on Nieve's forehead briefly, then took her hand between her own and whispered a few words over it. A moment passed, then Nieve's breathing began to deepen and her entire frame relaxed.

My shoulders dropped as tension I hadn't even known I was carrying lifted. It came back in an instant as Bernadine turned to me again.

"Who is she that you bring her personally?" she asked, getting right to the point as usual.

I glanced at Nieve. *Who is she now that she's away from everything she's ever known? She can't be a princess, nor a noblewoman tending a comfortable estate. She can no longer be step daughter or sister. Who is she going to be now that all of that is gone?*

"She must be important for you to risk your cover..." My eyes snapped back to Bernadine as she trailed off speculatively. "Don't tell me that you've burned your cover for her?!"

I pressed my lips together at the criticism implied by her surprise. "No, my cover isn't blown... sort of."

Bernadine padded over to my side of the room silently, grabbing our packs from the floor as she brushed past me. "Just tell me who she is, and what your plans are. I know you well enough to know you wouldn't do something so drastic without good reason, but if we've lost you in the capitol, it had better be a very good reason."

"She's the princess," I answered evenly, almost laughing at the comical expression on Bernadine's weather-lined face as she whipped around. But my face felt frozen, locked into place by years of worry and anger; and the pace we had set the entire last week to get to this waystation was taking its toll on me. I sank onto a wooden chair as Bernadine stared at me with wide eyes.

"She's Princess Nieve," I repeated, my tired brain making it hard to speak coherently. "I was ordered to execute her in secret for being a mage, but I brought her here instead."

Bernadine heaved a sigh and turned back to whatever she was doing to our packs. "So your cover is blown. Or will be once they find out you didn't fulfill your task. I trust no one followed you."

"Of course not. And like I said, my cover isn't blown. Another operative is providing a death story for me, and the requested... evidence of the

execution. The story will be that I took my own life in penance for my deed. There's an ancient tradition in the Huntsmen that requires a life to restore balance to the forest when evil has been done. It's outlawed now, but in this instance, I don't think anyone will question it."

"So you can't go back," Bernadine said quietly, more to herself than me, "and the princess cannot be known to have survived, or else your cover, and the remaining operative's cover, will be exposed."

"Exactly. We didn't have time as we traveled to discuss what she might do once she reached the Republic, but I'm assuming the council will be able to find somewhere she can live and well, be... useful."

"Useful," Bernadine snorted. "Yes, I think some of the council members will find her to be very useful." She craned her head back to look at me, her dark eyes cautious. "If you ask me, it may be safer to take her into Spindle. It would be easier for her to live anonymously there. You could stay here for a few days and then take the northern hills across Charmagne. I would keep your visit here to myself, of course."

I frowned. As a council member herself, Bernadine shouldn't really be recommending that we didn't check in with the ruling organization of the Dwarven Republic. Not all refugees needed to do so, but someone of Nieve's rank certainly would, as her identity would have to be managed. And they would no doubt want to question me about my departure from Snowdonia.

I glanced at Nieve to make sure the sleeping spell hadn't somehow worn off, then leaned closer to Bernadine. "You think some of the members would hurt her, like what happened to her father?"

"No!" Bernadine snapped. "Of course not. No one on the council had anything to do with that, even if—" she sighed. "Certainly not that. But I do think her presence could tip the current balance here, and I don't really want to see that happen. But maybe since she's a royal, she would be used to political games."

"No," I said vehemently, earning me a surprised glance. I drew in a measured breath. "She was raised away from the courts. She never liked politics and strategizing at court events. She'll just want to find some new friends and live as quiet a life as possible."

"You sound as if you would know," Bernadine ventured, still staring at me with eyes that saw too much.

I shook my head. “It’s just a guess. But even if she wanted to run to Spindle, we wouldn’t make it without something to help with her magic.”

Bernadine shrugged. “She’ll need to see Winola for that.” She held up a token that was now attached to my pack. “Some of the members of Winola’s guild are fairy engineers. They made these charms—same as the one that hid the safe house from your notice. They’ll hide us from notice as we cross the strait tonight.” She grinned, “well, that and my water magic, obviously. You’re lucky you got here when I was manning the station. With anyone else you’d have to wait for darkness to cross. We can leave whenever you want.”

“Let’s do it now, if we can,” I nodded back at Nieve, “for her sake.”

Chapter Nine

Nieve

Silence was so abrupt, the loudness of it woke me. In lieu of chattering creatures, my ears were filled with the rushing thump of my own heart, a disorienting sensation as I peered around blearily, attempting to find my bearings.

Waking up in a strange place, surrounded by strange people, without knowing the time of day, should be alarming. Extremely alarming, even. Before Alaric's revelation in the cave, I would have certainly thought so. But since then, I had become so used to sleeping and waking in strange places, and to a constant rushing into unknown circumstances under Alaric's guidance, that at this point, I was mostly curious. *And relieved. The noise in my head is gone!*

"How?" I asked no one in particular, my eyes resting on Alaric as I caught sight of him behind a plump woman with gray hair and sparkling blue eyes.

The gray-haired woman's face crinkled into a concerned frown, and she shared a glance with a smaller lady with dark hair and skin standing next to her. *That's the lady from the hut. The one Alaric knew.* From the way they looked at each other they were clearly friends.

"I brought you across the river while you slept," the second woman responded finally, her voice as thin and wiry as her frame.

"Winola gave you a charm to suppress your magic," Alaric interrupted, answering my actual question and gesturing to the gray-haired woman. "It's power should silence the creatures for you." His voice lilted up at the end of his statement, a hint of question.

I put my hand up to my throat. The slight weight of a gem pressed down on my collarbone. I traced the smooth leather of the cord that secured it

around my neck. “It’s almost distracting how quiet it is in my head right now,” I laughed. A few lines around Alaric’s eyes smoothed—practically a smile for him.

I took another look at the two women in front of me, noting their strange manner of dress and hairstyles. The dark haired one had tiny braids held back by a plain headband. Shockingly, she was dressed in loose fitting trousers and a sturdy brown vest over a white tunic. The gray haired woman, Winola, wore a pretty floral gown, cut from one piece of cloth with a cheerful butter yellow apron overtop. Her hair was piled on top of her head in charming gray waves, and the pockets of her apron seemed laden with objects. My eyes strayed back to Alaric.

“We’re in the Dwarven Republic. You’re safe,” he said, once again answering my questions before I asked them.

I nodded, more in response to his second statement than the first. Even though I had barely been conscious, I knew when we reached the shack in the woods, our next step would be entering the Dwarven Republic. But he was right. I was more concerned that the country responsible for my father’s death would ultimately be responsible for mine as well.

“Yes, you’re among mages now, my dear,” Winola said, her voice kind and motherly. “There are very few Dwarves born without magic, you know.”

I nodded dumbly, answering her smile with a timid one of my own. Winola fairly oozed warmth. *She reminds me of Agatha, actually*, I thought, snatches of my Nanny’s friendliness flitting across my mind. The type of person you knew instantly would bring you a cup of tea and cookies if you were upset, and sit with you until you felt better.

“I’ve already settled with Alaric that you can stay with me while we work out the best size suppression spell for you,” she continued, removing a pair of spectacles from one of her pockets and sliding them onto her nose. “They can give you headaches and such if they don’t, well, fit properly—if you know what I mean.”

Understanding dawned, and I looked back at Alaric. “I always got headaches at court,” I said, wanting someone to share my understanding. “I thought it was because of the stress of everything after my father died, but that’s also when my stepmother gave me the hair comb.”

He nodded, his lips pressed into a thin line. “A bad fit,” was all he said in reply.

I nodded sadly. *I thought it was a gift to mark a bond between us. Actually, it was an attempt to crush a part of me. A bad fit in more ways than one. Although it hadn't always been like that, had it?* I frowned, the beginning of a headache looming on the sides of my temples. *There's more pressing matters than trying to figure out what was real and what was fake in your relationship with Katharina right now, Nieve. One thing at a time.*

“Yes, well, I'm afraid my house may be a bad fit too, my dear. I only have one spare room,” Winola said, gesturing around the small space we were all crammed in with a cheerful shrug. “You'll find that we pack as much fun and people in here as possible, but everyone will be kind while we figure out what to do with you. That's my one rule really—have fun and be kind.” She chuckled, standing and pushing the stool she had been sitting on over to the closest wall. “After a few days of rest, I'll begin introducing you to the other clan heads, and we can start to get a feel for where you can be placed. Although heaven knows you may already have your own ideas on that! Still, it's always good fun to see what other people are interested in and a good way to get to know how we do things here in the Republic.”

The smile that had been growing on my lips as I listened to Winola's good-natured chatter faded as I caught sight of Alaric and Bernadine. They were whispering almost silently to each other, then both turned in my direction with serious looks as Winola asked my name.

“Nieve,” I replied, hesitating a moment to look at Alaric who gave a nod, although Bernadine folded her arms and looked disgruntled next to him. I continued on at another nod from Alaric even as worry at revealing my identity gnawed at me. “Princess Nieve, of Snowdonia.”

Winola stood stock still at my announcement. “Well!” she exclaimed finally, a smile starting to grow back on her face, “Well, fancy that. I never thought I'd meet royalty, let alone house a princess! You'll have to excuse our humble abode, but you look a sensible lass, for all that you're one of those... well, we won't go into that now. You look like you have a good head on your shoulders and a kindness about you too, so we'll leave it there.” She took her spectacles off, half folding them to put back in her pocket before sliding them back onto the bridge of her nose and looking at me once more, obviously flustered. “And you have magic too. A

Snowdonian princess with *magic*. I *never* thought I'd live to see something like that!" Winola's chattering picked up steam with each new thought, and I shot a bemused glance at Alaric. He was stoic as usual, but I thought I could detect a hint of impatience at Winola's stream of words.

"Now that you're here, you can be free to be yourself, dearie. It will be a relief, I'm sure. You can find what suits your magic best and your own interests and do that. Our family ties are important here, but it's naught to do with what clan you end up in. That's based on your aptitude." She shook her head and wheeled around to look at Alaric. "And you, not saying a word! I've always heard that you're a sly one. Goes with the profession, I'm sure. But this means, you know," she continued in a lower voice, looking at Bernadine, "we will definitely need to alert the council, won't we?"

Bernadine nodded, a hint of color showing on her weathered cinnamon cheeks. *She definitely looks upset about something*. She caught sight of me staring and pressed her lips into a tight smile, but my attention was claimed by Winola again.

"Yes, we'll have to call a council meeting, unfortunately, which will most definitely *not* be fun, but once that's done, we can get back to the good stuff." She made a shooing motion at Alaric, who blinked and opened the door of the tiny room. Bernadine stepped through, followed by Alaric and then Winola, who stopped on the threshold. "Are you coming?" she asked with an inquiring smile.

"Oh, where?" I asked in surprise.

"To the council meeting, of course! The sooner we go, the sooner it will be finished with."

"Oh, you meant right now!" I shot to my feet, grabbing the lilac purple shawl that had fallen from my shoulders onto the bed and wrapping it firmly around me again. It was the one Agatha put around my neck the night I left for my "mission", one of the ones my mother had woven years ago; a hobby of hers. As I grew older, I began wearing them as much as possible as a way to keep her close. This one was the only one I had with me when we fled Snowdonia. *I'm missing her love more than ever right now*.

"Yes, yes, you look fine my dear. Now, come along."

I chuckled at Winola's good-natured prodding and stepped through the door, catching up to Alaric who was waiting down the short passage outside

my room.

“Will you come too?” I asked, suddenly shaken by the thought that he might be done with me now that I was among other mages.

“Of course. I said I’d see you safe.” He shrugged. “I guess I meant safe and in a place you feel at home. Once you can tell me you feel at home, then I’ll leave.”

I nodded, his words both warming me and sending a prickle of unease through my chest. I didn’t want him to leave, but I did want to find a home. The last week of running had worn me out. *I’m not built for that.*

I felt Alaric’s gaze still on me and sneaked a glance. He was watching me, face as stoic as ever, so I offered a reassuring smile. As he turned away to follow Bernadine, I could have sworn a flash of vulnerability crossed his face. *Does he want to stay with me too?* I drew in a shaky breath. Not after refusing him the first time and causing him to abandon his commitment to rescuing mages in Snowdonia. *Whatever he once felt for me seems to have been enough to see me to safety, but even the most forgiving of people would have moved on by now.*

I stayed as close to Alaric as possible after I followed him out into the street. Winola’s house was a large, rambling row house sandwiched between two other smaller ones. None of them were organized constructions. It seemed that every house on the street had little nooks or bow windows pushing out into the sidewalk, with apparently random garrets above that stuck out above at odd angles. They were partially built into the stone face of a mountainside, which continued up at a steep vertical, gray and forbidding. I craned my neck to gauge how tall the mountain was, but my view was blocked as we hurried along, passing under a stone walkway from an upper level of the city.

Bernadine was leading our little group at a fast clip, with Alaric a few steps behind, and me practically tripping over his feet in my desire to stick close to someone familiar in an unfamiliar place.

“Welcome to Entfessholt!” Winola puffed cheerfully from her position at the end of our little line.

I glanced back and couldn’t help smiling as she gazed around the cramped streets with a proud grin. I quickly turned back around so I wouldn’t trip, almost running because of the quick pace Bernadine had set for us. In between my efforts to stick as close to Alaric as possible while also not run into him, I caught glimpses of a strange city.

It seemed mostly vertical, with row houses being built into the cliff face, like Winola’s, or into a large parapet on the leeward side of the mountain. When I caught glimpses beyond the huge wall, I could see only other mountains looming above the town.

We scurried between buildings that seemed to have grown in place, rather than having been built. There was no obvious planning, or even much attempt to reshape nature to human will. Rather, whoever built the city seemed to work with the natural landscape so that buildings and mountain worked in partnership. It was hard to keep my bearings with any sense of confidence as a newly arrived foreigner, but the town was charming, and the narrow streets were rather cozy instead of cramped.

We had only been walking for a few minutes when we were funnelled into a moderately sized town square, surrounded on all sides by what were clearly shops and businesses and dominated on one end by a hall that had been built into a huge cliff face. My feet slowed as I stared in wonder. Every inch of the ghostly stone cliff around the massive doors to the hall had been delicately chiselled by expert hands. The sheer size of it was overwhelming enough, but the amount of engraving, the craftsmanship, the way each smaller carved picture or pattern blended seamlessly with the others to create a cohesive scene of beauty that evoked a longing for something—a nameless ache for a higher calling, a purpose or a state of being mankind should have achieved but hadn’t yet. Why I felt that way, I couldn’t tell you, but it made me want to cry as I gazed in awe.

“It *is* magnificent, isn’t it?” Winola’s voice sounded beside me, and I looked down at the slightly shorter woman, nodding my agreement.

“I’ve never seen a building as beautiful as that!” I declared, and she puffed up with pride.

“All the clans helped to build it after the Sundering War. My clan, Clan Frohlich, provided most of the carving, but each clan head contributed their

best mages as well as their own power in creating the Halls of Knowledge and Wisdom, around which our capitol was built.” The permanent cheerful smile that hovered on Winola’s face faded slightly as she gazed at the building across from us. “It was meant to be the cornerstone of our society. A gathering place that would remind us to root all our actions in wisdom and knowledge instead of the vices and fear we sought to remove ourselves from.”

Blinking a few times, she looked back over at me and laughed. “And of course we still seek to do that today. But like any family, we have our moments!”

My hand was grabbed in a steel grip. Startled, I looked up to find Alaric standing in front of me.

“Don’t fall behind,” he admonished quietly, tugging me gently toward the beautiful Hall. “It’s too easy to get lost around here.”

I followed meekly, casting a skeptical glance around the town square. Like the rest of our short walk through Entfessholt, there weren’t many other pedestrians around. Only a few people hurried through the square, seemingly focused on business. None of them spared a glance our way.

Even so, I didn’t want to be separated from my group, and I didn’t complain when Alaric retained a firm grip on my hand until we entered the Hall.

In contrast to the nearly empty streets of the town, the Hall was buzzing with activity. The main doors spilled into an enormous cavern, every inch of which was carved with decorations and scenes, just like the outer cliff face. A system of skylights allowed sunlight to filter in from above, illuminating the grayish-ivory stone with a pale glow.

On one side of the concourse was a set of enormous wooden doors, closed and guarded by two soldiers. On the wall opposite, there was a set of smaller, less ornate doors that were also guarded. It seemed like every inch of space around the rest of the concourse was covered in alcoves or doors, all magnificently carved, that seemed to be a give of activities. Out of each scurried harassed-looking individuals, carrying books and papers or crates filled with who knows what. In a way, it reminded me of Machturm Castle when parliament was in session and the pages were being dispatched to negotiations on an important bill.

The flow of traffic didn't stop, but people began to stare as they passed us. It was only then that I realized Alaric and I were taller than most of the Dwarves milling around. At five feet four inches, I wasn't usually the shortest person around, but I had never considered myself tall. Among the Dwarves, I seemed to be as tall as most of the men, and several inches taller than the women. Alaric was at *least* half a foot taller than me, so he towered over everyone else.

Bernadine didn't spare anyone a glance, even as a few nodded in her direction. She paced directly toward the set of smaller guarded doors and led us through without any protest from either soldier, with Winola bustling in more slowly behind Alaric and me as she was continually issuing little greetings to every passing Dwarf.

The echoing chatter and shuffle of the concourse was instantly shut off as we passed into the room. I bumped into Alaric when he stopped a few feet inside, opening my mouth to apologize and then getting distracted as I noticed the room's occupants.

Three men sat at a long rectangular stone table in the middle of the room, staring at us with varied expressions.

"Good, you're here. Keifer, come with me. If you'll collect Ida, I'll go and find Johan. We need to convene urgently," Bernadine ordered one of the men, then turned to the others. "If you'll hold your questions until we get back with the others, I think it will be best." She gestured at me and Alaric, and suddenly I realized I was clutching part of his cape in my left hand. I dropped it with a start, hoping no one had noticed. Alaric didn't even twitch, his eyes on the others. "These two are important... guests. They have quite the tale to tell."

The younger man at the table glanced at one of the older ones, who gave a brief nod. The younger one—Kiefer, I guessed, since he followed Bernadine without complaint as she headed back out of the doors—gave me a speculative look that I didn't completely like as he passed by.

This time Alaric did twitch, his hand hovering toward one of the hunting knives at his hip. Suddenly aware at how any aggressive actions could be construed in a country not our own, I caught his hand in my own, drawing a startled look from him. I blushed but didn't let go, and after a moment, he squeezed my hand and looked back toward the others, his grip a reassuring tether.

The two men at the table murmured to each other while casting intermittent looks at our group while they gathered up some of the papers that had been laid out between them. Both seemed to be about middle-aged. One had wild coal-black hair and a long, thick beard. His forehead was wrinkled in a stern expression, and his eyes glinted like flint under dark eyebrows.

The other man was slightly shorter, with bushy red hair streaked with gray, and tan, wind-roughened skin that marked a life lived largely outdoors. His expression wasn't as forbidding as the other man, but he wasn't exactly friendly either. As silence settled on the room, he broke it suddenly with three loud sneezes, one after another, then wiped his nose with a handkerchief.

"Bless you, Cariel!" Winola called, letting loose a good-natured chuckle. "We should have had Kiefer ask Ida to bring along some more dust potion for you since she's coming here."

Cariel sniffled, stuffing his handkerchief back in his pocket and smoothing back some of his scruffy red hair. "There's no need. Unless whatever this meeting is about takes up too much time, I'll be back to the fields and farms in an hour or two and away from this cursed mine-dust!"

The dark-haired man across the table grunted and folded his arms across his chest. "Good for you that you can live a life free of it. Me and mine take our first breaths in mine dust and die too soon with it clouding our lungs—not that we complain! We know our work drives the spine of our Republic and will one day bring the northern barbarians to their knees!"

He directed his last words toward me and Alaric, daring us to respond. Every muscle in my body felt tense at the sudden attention, and I was at a loss for how to respond. Alaric seemed unmoved, however, and since he didn't feel the need to defend our presence, I didn't either.

A moment later, Bernadine returned, walking at a sedate pace behind an elderly man with completely white hair and a thin beard that trailed almost to his waist. He made no greetings to anyone as he traversed the room, eventually taking a seat at the head of the long table.

As he did so, the doors opened once more, admitting Kiefer, who sauntered in with a smirk as he headed to the stone table. He was followed, and quickly overtaken, by a thin woman with masses of curly grayish-black

hair. She gave me, Alaric, and Winona a terse nod as she passed us by, her lips pursed in irritation.

“Right, well, that’s everyone, dears,” Winola said gently and ushered us toward the table. Alaric and I dropped hands as we sat down, and I instantly missed the contact.

“Well, this is obviously something to do with the strangers in our midst,” the curly-haired woman said brusquely as I pulled my chair in. “Will someone explain *quickly* what is going on? I have patients to see this afternoon, and I’ve already set two bones today.”

“Ida is the leader of Clan Artzin,” Winola whispered in my ear as she took her seat next to me. “They’re our healers and the like. Ida’s magic is so strong she can actually set bones all on her own, although it takes a lot out of her. It’s why she’s so often irritable.”

Across the table, Ida closed her eyes and muttered under her breath for a moment. The dark-haired man shifted in his seat next to her. “Or maybe she’s irritable because she spends all day and all night healing the wounds of the unfortunate and the fools of our country,” he spat, shooting Winola an impatient look. “But never mind that. We’re all here. Will *someone* tell us why?”

“That’s Brenner,” Winola whispered with a chuckle. “And before you ask, he’s always like that. He and Ida are cousins, so maybe irritability runs in their family!”

My eyes widened at how cavalierly Winola brushed off what seemed like almost open hostility to me, but as Brenner opened his mouth to respond, the wizened old man who had taken the seat at the head of the table cleared his throat.

“Indeed, I must concur with my colleagues from Clans Artzin and Murrish, let us not delay in explaining the reason for this emergency council meeting. I was in the middle of annotating a most interesting translation of the Bard’s Text, so I hope we have good reason to be here. Bernadine, you are the one who called this session. What was your reason for doing so?” His papery voice was surprisingly strong and carried without effort along the table. Bernadine stood from her seat next to Alaric and addressed the table in her own quiet, even tone.

“I called this session because we have two refugees seeking asylum in the Dwarven Republic. One is a Snowdonian mage who only recently

discovered her powers. The other is a former member of our spy network in the capitol.”

A powerful sneeze interrupted Bernadine. As he wiped his nose, Cariel spoke up from the other side of Bernadine. “Get to the point, Bern. Any mage or former agent has automatic asylum here. None of us dispute that ancient right. What is your real reason for calling us here?”

Bernadine drew a deep breath. “This man is Alaric Weidmann, better known to us all as The Huntsman.” A hiss of indrawn breath went around the room. “Yes, *that* Huntsman. He has faked his own death and is unable to continue his work in our network.”

As everyone gazed at Alaric in varying stages of shock, I felt Brenner’s eyes slide to me. I tried to ignore that look, dreading the moment when everyone else followed suit.

“You’ve burned your cover?!” Kiefer demanded, astonished. “What could possibly be worth doing that? We were sure you would draw your last breath before leaving your position. After all that work, to now be—”

Bernadine cut him off. “He faked his death so his treason wasn’t discovered. He did so to escort a newly discovered mage to safety.” She motioned to me, her eyes flicking to each of her colleagues in turn as she announced, “This is that mage. Allow me to introduce Princess Nieve of Snowdonia. She is the one with magic.”

In contrast to Alaric’s introduction, the room went deathly silent at mine. After an endless moment of wide eyes staring at me, everyone burst into noise all at once. Out of the corner of my eye, I noticed Alaric’s hand stray toward his hunting knife once more, and I grabbed his arm under the table, meeting his eye for a second in warning before dropping it. *I wonder why they didn’t disarm him when we entered the Hall*, I asked myself in a detached way as the cacophony of voices continued swirling around us. *Oh, that’s right, he’s already known to them as an ally. I suppose they’ve trusted him all these years to get mages into their protection...* I shook my head at this new picture of him, this new Alaric who still seemed a bit like the old one.

“You’re all overwhelming the poor thing!” Winola scolded, standing up and fixing everyone with a glare.

The same detached part of my mind noticed that standing up, she was the same height as Alaric sitting down. *I wonder what being as tall as he is*

would be like. Would having a higher view of your surroundings change your perspective on life in general? I wrenched myself back to the moment as Alaric turned toward me. Suddenly, I noticed that *everyone* in the room was looking at me.

Oh, they're waiting for you to do something. Something princess-y probably. As I drew in a fortifying breath, I mentally pulled on my princess persona—something I had gotten all too comfortable forgetting during our flight to the Republic. Holding my head high, I gracefully climbed to my feet, executing a regal nod to the table in general, and directing myself to the elderly man at the end of the table, who seemed vaguely in charge.

“Thank you for your welcome, Clan Leaders. What Bernadine has reported is true. I am Nieve, Princess Royal of Snowdonia, and I have come to beg asylum at your door. I have recently discovered that I am a mage, although it seems...” I trailed off, unable to stop tears from springing to my eyes as I remembered the betrayal from my stepmother that led to this moment. I dabbed at my eyes as surreptitiously as I could, but it didn’t wipe away the source of the tears—heartbreak.

Alaric pulled me back down to my seat, which I allowed gratefully, and continued my story.

“Her magic was known to her stepmother, although it had been suppressed and hidden from her for years. I was charged with her murder and the recovery of her heart for use in some ritual of black magic.”

I shuddered as another ripple of shock went around the room.

“I believe that the High Inquisitor is ultimately behind such a plot, although,” Alaric hesitated for the briefest moment before continuing his news, “although in my opinion, the queen has been completely compliant in his schemes. If she was willing to dabble in black magic to protect Snowdonia from common magic, there’s no telling what she will do next.”

There was a charged silence after Alaric sat back down, which was broken by Brenner. “Didn’t I say such a time as this would come? We labor for what?! So the northern barbarians can root out our fellow mages and turn the land over to those who dabble in darkness,” he stood abruptly, gesturing to me, “now they’re even handing over one of their own royals to be slaughtered!” He slapped his hands down on the stone table, making me jump. “How much evil will we allow on our doorstep, and for how long? Just now, Cariel and I were meeting to review the harvest and mining

yields. We scrape and work ourselves to the bone every year, hiding in our mountains instead of reclaiming the land of our forefathers! What sign would the rest of you have if not the sign of the northerners betraying their own?!”

The elderly man at the end of the table cleared his throat, silencing the buzzing murmurs of the others after Brenner’s alarming speech. “You speak of signs, Brenner—just so. I have read ancient records that speak of the signs of the kings’ and queens’ power. That the nature of their magical affinity leads to the strength of their reign. But what is the sign of this princess’ power?”

All eyes snapped to me again, but I was saved from the trouble of finding my voice.

“She can speak to *animals*, Johan! Imagine that!” Winona burst out, then squeezed my shoulder apologetically. “Sorry, I should have let you say that. It’s just so exciting!” She squealed, then beamed around the table.

I smiled at her, but the fatigue of the last week and the weight of everyone’s attention was quickly draining me. “Please, I don’t think the magic I have is any sort of sign. I just want to live a quiet life. I’ve only just discovered that I *am* a mage. I know almost nothing about my magic. You must believe me when I say that I don’t want to cause any trouble—and I won’t!” I swallowed heavily, my eyes darting to each clan leader in turn. “Though I come from the country of your enemies, will you let me stay?” I asked, desperately, grasping at the heart of what I wanted—safety.

“Let you stay?” Johan asked ponderously. “You heard Cariel earlier. Our ancient laws demand that we give you succor, both you and your honored companion.” He bowed his head at Alaric, then looked back at me. “As to living quietly, the ancient scrolls of wisdom record many sayings as to the fate of kings and queens. None of them are quiet, Princess Nieve. You weren’t born to such a thing. Your destiny is to be a vessel for power.”

My heart rebelled at such a thought. *I was born to be such a thing. I’ve lived that way my entire life. Just because my parents were a king and queen doesn’t mean I want to be one. I would have been happy being a woodsman’s wife when Alaric asked me all those years ago, if circumstances would have allowed me to accept.*

I snapped out of my furious thoughts as Alaric turned toward me fully. “You’re tired,” he said, probably noticing the angry flush I could feel on my

usually pale cheeks. “They’ve said we can stay. Surely they’ll allow us to give more information on our flight from Snowdonia later?” He directed the last question to Winona, who beamed.

“Oh yes, isn’t that right, Johan? The required notice has been given of their presence. I’m sure the poor dears are exhausted from their trip. Let them get some rest and we can arrange another session to decide what to do with the Princess in a few days’ time.”

I stiffened at her words. *Decide what to do with me?* My eyes snapped to Brenner, who was speaking to Kiefer in a low voice. Kiefer was watching me with hooded eyes and smirk.

“That’s fine with me,” Ida snapped from across the table. She stood and nodded at the others. “Really a note would have sufficed to give notice instead of a meeting,” she complained in Bernadine’s direction before turning to Johna. “I assume we’re adjourned?”

“Yes,” Johan heaved a long suffering sigh. “It seems our guests are exhausted, and creating a plan of where to settle them will take some time. I will send messengers with the new meeting time as soon as they are rested.”

At his words, the meeting dissolved. Bernadine leaned close to Alaric to say something, while Winola bounced out of her chair and offered a hand to help me out of mine.

“Come my dear, let’s get you settled at home. Some hot tea and a warm bed is what you need. And maybe a tweak to that suppression charm?”

I gave her a wan smile as I rubbed at my temples. “I do have a small headache, but that could be from a lot of things, not just the charm.”

“True enough, dear!” she chuckled, giving Alaric a mischievous smile—which he did *not* return—before turning and leading the way out of the council room. “I assume your chivalrous knight there will be escorting you back to my house?” she asked as we passed Brenner and Kiefer, still conferring closely as they walked toward the doors.

She sent a mock scolding look toward Alaric that would have made me laugh if I hadn’t been so flustered. “Our streets are safe, dear Alaric, there’s no need to worry. Of course, old habits die hard, I’m sure. And you may have other reasons for escorting her home too!” With a tinkling laugh, she sped along, Bernadine passing through the door ahead of her and turning away to snag a passing messenger.

I hardly noticed the magnificent concourse as we passed through it and into the town beyond. *What do they mean they have to decide what to do with me? Or that my destiny is as a vessel for power? Have I traded one court of dangers for another?*

Chapter Ten

Alaric

Nerves thrummed as we passed through the cavernous entrance hall of what seemed to be the Dwarven parliament building. The sea of movement from busy passersby pulled at my nerves, especially as Bernadine was already gone, organizing preparations to house me at her clan's headquarters. I knew I should be safe here, but I wanted someone I could trust at my back, in case I needed to protect Nieve. Especially since the reaction of the council didn't go how I thought it would.

Our progress was slow. Winola stopped every few feet to exchange greetings with a passerby or to point out some feature to Nieve. I didn't bother pretending to be interested. Art had never held my interest, and the massive number of carvings covering the walls seemed more like a big waste of someone's time as well as a pain to upkeep.

No wonder that Clan leader back there was sneezing so much. The amount of dust that settles on all of those surfaces... I shrugged and resumed my scan of those around us.

Focusing on the present was useful for distracting myself from the general dissatisfaction I felt after our meeting with the council. I had expected them to welcome Nieve and then focus on my report on the current state in Snowdonia. Instead, Clan Leader Brenner, and especially Clan Leader Kiefer, seemed to fixate on Nieve, more interested in her presence than I had expected.

It's not jealousy, I told myself, irritated. Or if part of it is, that's not the whole reason I feel off-kilter. Did it seem like Brenner wanted to use Nieve to further his cause against Snowdonia? I just don't know how he would. Unless he plans to expose the plot against her. I shook my head.

The Snowdonian people were so conditioned to viewing mages as the enemy that I doubted even the despicable orders I had been given would turn them against their queen. The only outcome I could see from using Nieve's story would be a drawing together of the great ruling houses of Snowdonia against the wayward mage princess who fled to Snowdonia's great enemy for succor. A Snowdonian court enmeshed in power games meant we could rescue mages without drawing much notice; a Snowdonian court united would be a terrifying specter.

Finally, we passed outside into an evening that was quickly darkening to night. Twinkling lights appeared in every window, casting golden pools of light on the city streets. Shadows deepened as we began winding our way through the maze of crooked allies and narrow lanes.

"I need to get a pebble out of my shoe," Nieve whispered as Winola stopped to chat with yet another friend. In contrast to our walk to the Dwarven Hall, the streets were now full of people headed home after a long work day.

"There." I tipped my chin at a nearby front stoop that had stairs broad enough to make a comfortable seat. Nieve limped over to it and began fishing for the stone.

The doorstep she was sitting on was at the corner of a crossroad. The lane we had just walked up crossed one side of the building, and a wide alley extended along the other side of the building. In front of it, the two roads dumped into a tiny little square that held a bubbling fountain with a number of ramshackle chairs grouped near it.

A number of women stood near the chairs instead of sitting on them, laughing at a story one of them was telling as their children chased each other. It was a nice scene. One I hadn't seen in Snowdonia very often.

Although for the last ten years I haven't had much time to hang around cozy town squares at dinner time. My days were spent either at the border with the Wasteland hunting Beasts that broke through into our northern woodland, completing missions for the crown, or smuggling mages out of the country. Dinner usually consisted of whatever game me or my unit members had caught and roasted over the fire.

I glanced back at Winola to see if she was ready to move on. She was staring over my shoulder at Nieve with a confused frown that flipped to panic in an instant.

Whirling, I had just enough time to catch sight of Nieve's wild, frantic eyes as she was dragged into the alley by two rough-looking people, one of whom had a hand over her mouth.

Blood surged through my veins, coursing with crackling energy as I sprang toward the kidnappers. Nieve was struggling and kicking against them, which slowed their progress down just enough.

Pumping my arms hard, I drew quick, sharp breaths as I sprinted down the alley. About halfway down, I caught up with them. Steel flashed in the gloom as one of them drew a knife.

Usually my mind went blank during an altercation, my senses in charge as I moved in the fight, responding to attacks and taking advantage of openings before I could even form coherent thoughts. This time, the sight of a deadly weapon so close to Nieve sent a bolt of icy anger rippling across my mind. One thought drove every movement I made—*get her to safety and end the threat*.

A squeak of fear escaped Nieve as the attacker's blade swept toward me. I ducked, glad that the weapon was pointed at *me* instead of her, while knowing the other man could well have a weapon of his own.

The attacker with the knife pressed forward with quick slashes. *He obviously knows his work*, a detached part of my brain assessed. I feinted left, but he guessed my ruse and slashed right. I pulled back just in time, but still caught a shallow cut along my forearm, the sting threatening to distract my single minded ambition. *You're not a slave to what you feel*, I reminded myself, squaring up against the attackers again. *You're in control of this fight, and you'll bring it to a conclusion on your terms*.

Resisting the urge to pull out my own long hunting knife, I focused instead on his movement, trying to quickly get a feel for his footwork.

There! An opening presented itself, and on instinct, I stomped at his ankle with one foot while smacking his knife-wielding hand upward with a calculated strike to break his grip. The knife skittered out of his hand and he dropped to a knee, clutching his ankle.

Dismissing him momentarily, his shrieks of pain confirming that he wasn't an active threat, I surged the last few steps to where Nieve continued to struggle with the remaining attacker. Instead of fighting, he pushed Nieve toward me violently, dancing out of reach. She stumbled toward me,

smashing her knee on the cobblestones as I caught her, her cry of pain sending a flash of rage through me.

The other man grabbed his injured friend and disappeared down the alley. My blood surged at the thought of them getting away, but the rational part of my brain knew I needed to deal with the situation in front of me.

“Are you hurt?” I asked Nieve, as I checked the roof line to make sure there were no other surprises in store.

She clutched my arms as I held her upright against me. “Fine, I think, just a little bruised,” she gasped.

I could feel her heart hammering as fast as a hummingbird. *She’s alive. She’s okay.*

“We need to get to safety,” I told her, looking down into wide brown eyes.

“Let’s go home,” Winola puffed as she jogged toward us, coming up to Nieve’s side and taking her arm to help her regain her balance. “It’s just up that lane across the square. I can’t believe—are you bleeding?!” Winola pointed to my arm. Blood was dripping to the ground in a slow patter.

“Yes, but it’s not bad. Let’s get inside and I can bandage it.”

She nodded, dumbstruck, and slid her arm around Nieve’s waist. I held onto my old friend for a moment longer, then let her go reluctantly. It was better to let Winola keep her upright so I could have my hands free in case of another attack. Loosening my knife, I led the way out of the alley in the direction Winola had indicated. A quick glance around the square showed that as loud as the altercation had sounded in the alley, it hadn’t disturbed the mothers and their children even the slightest. We started forward, but I slowed when Winola called a young lady over as we passed by the fountain.

“Ingrid—thank you, dear. Run to Doc Ida’s house. Tell her to come to my house immediately to see a patient. There was a fight—“

I cut her off. “There’s no need for details. Let’s get moving.”

Winola nodded to the girl, who eyed my dripping arm with a startled glance before scampering off. A quick peek at Nieve spurred me on as well. She was obviously scared, and unless she had changed much in the last few years, I knew she had no capability of defending herself if we were attacked again.

Winola’s house was truly only a few minutes away. We crossed the square, passing under one of the numerous stone footbridges that connected

the top floors of some houses with the streets on the next level up the mountain. Meeting no resistance, only chattering groups of people on their way home that gave us a wide berth and worried looks, we found ourselves entering Winola's sprawling, multi-tiered row home.

I did a quick search of the first level, assuring myself that it was clear, then went straight back to the kitchen, where Winola was settling Nieve at a table and calling to the man cooking at an enormous range to bring a cup of tea. She shooed him away after he brought the steaming mug over and handed me a towel with an alarmed look.

The door to the kitchen swung open and I jumped up, putting myself between Nieve and the newcomer. Ida swept in, sizing up the situation with one glance.

"So it's true. The newcomers have had an accident." She paced over to the table and deposited a small case there, turning to me with lifted eyebrows and nodding toward my covered arm. "I assume you need attention most?"

"See to her first. I'll wait until she's done."

"No Alaric, let her see you first. I'm fine," Nieve insisted. The worried look in her eyes broke down the protest I was about to make.

She's always been generous like that. It's why she's easy to love. I sat down with a thump, my thoughts swirling. The doctor swished the towel off my arm and began a brisk examination of the wound.

"Superficial. This will be easy, thankfully," she muttered to herself.

Love? I asked myself dazedly. I knew I had never truly gotten her out of my system over the years, but I had assumed it was because I had been focused on my career instead of finding a partner. I watched Nieve as she scrutinized the doctor's movements anxiously. *Do I love her? It's been so long, how could I still love her?* The memory of Nieve's old nanny, Agatha, scolding a village girl while Nieve and I eavesdropped surfaced in my mind.

"Love is a choice you make even more than it's a feeling. That's why they say actions speak louder than words, girl. You might feel love towards each other—good. But is he choosing to hold only you in his heart? And are you choosing to hold only him in yours? If so, it doesn't matter how near or far you are, your choices will bring you together again."

At the time, Agatha had been counseling the tanner's daughter about the potter's son, who was being sent on an apprenticeship near the capitol, but now it felt like those words had been spoken across the years for my benefit.

Nieve glanced up from watching whatever the doctor was doing to look at me, catching me staring. Her pale skin flushed beet red, and she looked back to my arm, clearly uncomfortable with my gaze. I tried to ease the thunderous frown that always seemed to mar my face when I wasn't paying attention, but it was too late. I had already scared her away again.

As I always have. But it doesn't matter. And how you feel doesn't matter right now either. What matters is keeping her safe, and it seems like Entfessholt isn't the haven I once thought.

Winola seemed to catch the direction of my deliberation. "Ida, this was no accident! Two men set upon Nieve and tried to kidnap her!"

The doctor's movements stilled as she was pulling my sleeve back over my fully healed arm before speeding back up. She got up and walked briskly to where Nieve sat on the other side of the table and began checking for bruises and asking sporadic, low questions.

I took a peek at my former cut, marveling at the way the magic had knit my skin together almost flawlessly. I had received magical healing before during smuggling missions, but it never failed to amaze.

"I caught sight of the ruffians, Ida, and they were two of Kiefer's men, I swear it! And you *know* what that means."

My attention snapped back to the conversation between the two Dwarven women, the prickling feeling of danger I had been experiencing since the council meeting growing stronger.

"No, Winola, I don't *know* what that means, although I can guess what you're insinuating. Just because Brenner was speculating that Nieve's presence could be useful in forwarding his agenda against the north doesn't mean he ordered Kiefer's men to kidnap her."

"You know as well as I that your cousin—"

Ida shot Winola a repressive look and interrupted her. "Yes, I do know my cousin. There's no one more patriotic than him. But he's not a madman!" She shook her head and turned back to Nieve. "You're sure you don't have any other aches and pains?"

Nieve shook her head and the doctor gave a sharp nod. "If you were really manhandled like Winola said, you may be achy for the next few days. I'll leave a willow bark infusion with Winola since you're staying here, correct?"

Nieve nodded.

Her interest in Nieve's accommodations piqued my suspicion. *If she's Brenner's cousin, and Winola thinks that Brenner is involved, maybe she's in on it too.* Any undefined hope I had allowed over the last week that I might be able to finally live without one eye watching my back fled in an instant. Keeping my breathing even, I shifted my weight, ready to spring out of my chair at the first sign of danger.

"Good," Ida affirmed, gathering the handful of items she had pulled out of her bag as she examined us and putting everything back in order. "Rest the next few days, and stay inside while we figure out who did this to you. It's certainly a stain on our hospitality, which we Dwarves take seriously." She snapped her bag closed and looked at Winola. "I'll go file a complaint now with Clan Damliche if you like. You should stay here and look after the patients."

Winola thanked her gratefully. My attention was distracted for a second as I noticed Bernadine slip inside the door almost silently.

"Oh you're here, Bern, that's good. As I said, we Dwarves take our hospitality seriously, so the more people looking after our guests the better," Ida repeated as she walked briskly toward the door. "I'll check back in on the two of you in a day or so, but you should both be fine." With a quick step, she was gone.

Bernadine made her way over to the table we were grouped around, silently assessing us. Her eyes flicked to the cook on the other side of the kitchen who was putting the finishing touches on a delicious smelling meal. As hungry as I was, even the scent of good food couldn't put me off my worries.

"Nieve was nearly kidnapped," I told Bernadine as she approached. Her mouth tightened and she nodded, casting another glance at Nieve before responding.

"I heard. And I know who ordered it." She shook her head. "One of my contacts overheard Brenner giving the order to two of Kiefer's men. He

wants to force a marriage with Nieve and use her birthright to stake a claim to the Snowdonian throne.”

The bottom dropped out of my heart like a rock off a cliff at her words. That someone would view Nieve as little more than a pawn to be used in a game of kings made my blood boil instantly. That he would force her into *marriage*, deny her a supportive partner to walk with her through life in exchange for gaining power and heirs turned my boiling blood to a call for vengeance against such a person.

“It’s not safe for you here,” Bernadine urged me. “I thought so to begin with, but I didn’t realize how obsessed he is with conquering the north. It’s a madman’s thought, and he’d never get enough council support to make it work, but—“ she glanced at Winola.

“He’s like a dog with a bone when he decides to do something,” she replied to Bernadine’s unfinished sentence. “And it will be too late for Nieve if we don’t act fast.”

She looked over at me and her eyes lit up. “Why don’t *you* marry her, Alaric? I’ve seen the way you look at each other. Something tells me there is more between you than it first seems.”

I glanced at Nieve, who was staring at me with a shocked expression on her face. Memories danced across my mind. *Chasing fireflies together as children. Sneaking a dance at the midsummer festival while Agatha was distracted. The feel of her in my arms and the blushes she gave me as we grew older. Her sweetness to every person she met, but most especially to me. She had always been sweet to me.* My mother’s voice cut across my mind.

“She’s always been sweet on you boy, but don’t let it go to your head. You’re nothing but a project to her. She’s the daughter of a king. You’re the son of a trapper. By some miracle you’re good with a sword and have a chance to follow in your brother’s footsteps. Don’t let a pretty face distract you now. She’ll chew you up and spit you out and if the fancy takes her, she’ll ruin your life for a whim.”

My mother was wrong. Nieve was every good thing made even better. But she hadn’t been wrong in one regard. Nieve had rejected me, once and for all. Maybe I had been a project to her all along. That didn’t sit right against the memories of our friendship, but if it was true, I wasn’t hurt by it anymore. Ten years ago I would have done almost anything to make her

mine. But now, the idea of trapping her into marriage with me—the person she had known better than anyone else and hadn't wanted—made me sick. *I would be no better than Brenner. Trapping her into a relationship with someone she could never love.*

Still, I couldn't deny a thrill at the thought of having a reason to be by her side for the rest of my life. Of having the *right* to make sure she was safe and the opportunity to see her happy. *Not with me of course. Not as actual husband and wife. I would never force her into something so twisted. But if I could see her safe, happy, and well, perhaps that would be enough for both of us?*

My insides twisted as Nieve flushed and looked away, wrapping her purple shaw, which had somehow survived the attack, around her in tight little tucks.

"It's a good idea," Bernadine mused. "We could take you to Johan. He could marry you by the old rites. It's an ancient set of vows enforced by magic that create a heart-bond between the husband and wife. No one can break such a bond except the couple themselves."

"Then Brenner would be *forced* to abandon his ideas and all would be well again," Winola beamed, giving Nieve a side hug.

Bernadine opened her mouth to argue but subsided without a sound.

I agree. The Republic isn't safe for us—whether we're married or not.

"There's no need to do something so drastic," I said, forcing the words out with difficulty.

Nieve snapped her eyes back to mine, her expression vulnerable.

She just wants to be safe. I'll do anything to make that happen. "We can run. We'll go under cover of darkness tonight."

Bernadine huffed a sigh. "I agree you should run—tonight even. But Winola's right. Brenner won't stop unless he knows it is futile. He'll hunt you down and force the marriage anyway. And his folk are the mountain folk. There's nowhere in the Republic that you could hide."

I cast a despairing look at Nieve, who was watching me with fear in her eyes. Pushing out of my chair, I paced over before her. "Give us a few minutes alone," I ordered Winola and Bernadine, who complied quickly.

I knelt in front of Nieve, my blood pounding and my heart heavy with hope and despair. "I'm sorry for bringing you here. Your instincts were

right. I thought you'd be safe among other mages, but it turns out that the Dwarven Republic is no safe place for the daughter of a king."

Nieve reached out swiftly, taking both my hands in hers. "You weren't to know. Most of the people we've met here seem good. But you're right. My blood seems to mark me wherever I go, choosing my fate, no matter what I might want for myself." Her voice broke, cracking my heart with it.

She doesn't want me, and yet fate is drawing us back together again, her only safety to bind herself with magic.

"I know this isn't what you want," I whispered, my voice rough with emotion. "I can respect that. I would never force you into anything that would limit you or take away your freedom. Is there anything else we can do? Should we try our luck and just run? I'll get you somewhere safe. I'll die to fulfill that promise if I must."

I should have asked her opinion the first night we ran. Well, I guess she gave it—she didn't want to come here. I ignored it, thinking she just didn't understand. Now here we are.

A tear escaped, trailing down her cheek and dripping down onto our joined hands. "If we don't do what they said, then what's preventing him from coming after us? I'm afraid. I'm terrified we'll be caught, and I'll be taken, and you'll be... You'll be—" She stifled a sob and looked directly at me, her fear palpable behind the tears gathered in her eyes.

I nodded slowly, certainty settling over the doubt and vulnerability and shock of everything swirling in my chest. "Then we'd better do it. Tonight. I'll find a way to make it all up to you later."

Tears were streaming down her face by now and she nodded wordlessly, pulling her hands away to wipe at her face. She turned to hide her sorrow from me, a kind gesture, but futile, and I resisted the urge to pull her into my arms. *She doesn't want comfort from me. She only wants protection.*

I stood and turned back to Bernadine and Winola. "We'll do it. Tonight. But I want to leave tonight too. We'll head for Spindle, I guess. Don't tell anyone else, not even Johan."

Winola jumped and clapped her hands. "I knew you would. And I know it's not a mistake. Like I said, I noticed right off that the way you two look —"

Bernadine cut her off. "Good. Winona, do you have any heat charms or hiding charms on hand here? If not, I can give them the one we use at the

safehouse.”

“No, no, dear, there’s no need for that. If you *must* go I can give you heat charms. And I’m sure I have at least one hiding charm in the house too.”

My eyes flicked to the cook still working away in his corner. Winola followed my gaze. “Oh don’t worry about him. He’s as loyal as they come. My husband, you know,” she winked at me. “Besides, I put up a privacy spell right after we came in. Not because I thought we needed privacy, but because he *hates* noise while he’s cooking.” She gazed at his back fondly for a moment, then patted my arm and bustled out of one of the doors to the back of the house.

“As soon as Winola returns, let’s leave for the Hall. Johan will still be there and can perform the rites. Winola and I will be witnesses. Then you’ll come back to my house and escape from there.”

I nodded and Nieve turned back, wrapping her shawl around her shoulders once more.

“Thank you, Bernadine,” she said softly, coming to stand by my side. Hesitating a moment, she took my hand, her grip gentle but warm.

I stared at the connection, a prickling sensation on my neck making me shrug my shoulders slightly to get rid of it. She gave me a pained look and dropped her eyes to the floor. *She’s just being nice. It doesn’t mean the same thing to her.* But as Winola bustled back into view, a small bag in her hand, Nieve didn’t let go, and I allowed myself to keep ahold of her too.

“Let’s go,” Bernadine rumbled, heading toward the door. “I have some of my people scouting the streets, so it should be safe. But the sooner we get this over with, the better.”

“And the sooner you two can start your future together,” Winola added, bringing up the rear as we shuffled out of her kitchen.

Chapter Eleven

Nieve

We found Johan in a large office located near the council room. His white hair blended with the stacks of vellum and ancient-looking manuscripts piled around him. He looked up with a bemused glance once Bernadine was able to get his attention, blinking through thick spectacles that gave him an owlish look.

My stomach turned over as Bernadine explained our request—with interruptions from Winola every few words. Eventually, he looked over to Alaric and me with a serious expression on his face.

“This is highly irregular. I can, as leader of the council, perform a marriage ceremony with the ancient rites for you. As Bernadine and Winola are willing to stand witness, it would all be binding and legal. But I’m not convinced that you understand what a serious commitment that would be to each other. And of course, I don’t understand the urgency, though you young people always seem to be in a rush about everything these days.” He coughed dryly, fixing his attention on me. “I am sure that a princess such as yourself, Princess Nieve, would have been raised to expect a grand wedding. Although it wouldn’t be the same as if you had a wedding in Snowdonia, I am sure that many Dwarves would be happy to attend any celebration you see fit for your status.”

Alaric shifted next to me. “We have run from dangerous circumstances into uncertain ones. What Bernadine and Winola told you is correct—our true desire is to join our lives together. We understand and welcome the permanence of the bond. Unmarried, we would be forced to live separately and we aren’t willing to do so another day.”

Alaric cleared his throat, an uncharacteristic gesture for him, before continuing on in a quieter voice. “If it puts you at ease, I confess that I have

loved Nieve since we were children together. I asked her to marry me many years ago, but..." he paused, casting a glance my way. The truth of what happened fluttered between us for a moment until he continued on, "We did not have the opportunity until now," he said, stretching the truth a little." After such a long time apart, do not make us wait even another day."

His words sent a thrill through me—but in its wake was heartbreak. Like most convincing lies, there was truth in what he said, but I knew that even though he once felt that way about me, he couldn't feel that way any longer. Still, a part of me longed to pretend it was all true.

Johan sniffed loudly and turned his attention to me. "Your young man makes a very pretty speech. Do you feel the same as he does?"

My heart thumped an irregular beat in my chest, and I felt my face heat with embarrassment as I knew I was about to speak the truth, but Alaric would assume it was a lie. *At least I hope he thinks it's a lie. It would be even worse if he knew my feelings and pitied me for them for the rest of our lives together.*

"He asked me to marry him ten years ago."

Winola gasped, her eyes focusing on me in shock.

"I—we couldn't at the time, and we have been apart since then. Please don't make me face another day without him." I cringed at the pathetic quality in my voice and took a reflexive step toward Alaric to hide. *I'm the only princess in the world who can't find a way to demand what she wants.*

Johan's ponderous expression relaxed into a fatherly smile. "Far be it from me to stand between you then. And, of course, arguably our greatest writer, the venerable Beed, has said only fools keep two lovers apart."

Behind Johan's back, Bernadine rolled her eyes and muttered under her breath. The sight almost made me giggle, but my nerves were stretched too thin to give in to mirth.

He creaked to his feet, shuffling around his enormous desk and lecturing as he walked. "Let us repair to the Hall of Wisdom. That is where such ceremonies are usually performed, and at this hour we shall surely have the use of the sacred stone to ourselves."

He stopped to stare at us over his spectacles as he passed by. "You may not know, but that is where such marriage rites are usually performed, at a place where water and stone are joined, there will husband and wife be joined, as the old saying goes."

He shuffled onward at a slow but steady pace. Winola made a shooing motion at Alaric and myself while Bernadine quickly wound her way around stacks of books and curiosities so that she could open the door for Johan.

Passing out of his office, we made slow progress across the spectacularly carved concourse and over to the enormous guarded doors on the other side. The two guards bowed to the clan leaders and opened the doors, closing them again more quietly than I expected after we entered.

The Hall of Wisdom was an odd place. Its ceiling, though too high to reach up and touch, was much lower than the entry hall we had just left. The walls had also been carved, but not with decorations. Instead they had been carved so they were smooth and square edged. One wall of the room was entirely taken up by hollowed out stone shelves, each crammed with varying amounts of paper. On the opposite end of the hall was a raised dais with seven stone thrones, each plain and of equal height to the others. In between the two were dozens of chairs grouped around tables in a seemingly haphazard manner, all of which were empty.

The most striking thing about the room was an enormous stalactite and stalagmite that were almost touching in the exact center of the space. The air around each was almost luminous, shimmering in a transparent rainbow of colors that drew the eye immediately.

“That is the sacred stone of course. The rainbow veil protects it from decay, as of course, we use this chamber for parliament and large meetings and such on almost a daily basis. The sacred stones would be completely dried up by now if they hadn’t been protected by the founders long ago.” Johan shuffled forward, following Bernadine who had nearly reached the stone by now. “You must keep the veil in mind as you take your vows this evening,” he instructed us. “Set a veil around your own hearts to keep the two of you safe from the actions of the world around you.”

I was barely listening to his words, my thoughts fluttering from one anxiety to the next. *Alaric must be feeling so trapped. He hasn’t said a word. Of course, he’s never exactly been chatty. Neither have I, for that matter. Maybe I should say something?*

My nerves kept my mouth glued shut as Johan continued talking, arranging us around the rainbow veil. Alaric led me to the places indicated for us, still letting me cling to his hand.

The depth of how much I was depending on him weighed on me—the fact that he was willing to marry me to keep someone from chasing me against my will on top of all the other sacrifices he made for me in the last few weeks. My throat closed up at the thought, and I felt ashamed of how little I had to give him. If all had been well and we were marrying in Snowdonia, I could at least bring a manor house and some land to the table, connections to royalty, and stability. *I'll make it up to him, I swear it. I'll use what skills I have and we'll work toward tomorrow together. And I can be kind. He's never really had much kindness in his life. I can at least do that for him.*

Johan began to speak in an even more officious tone, and I followed along as he recited marriage vows very similar to the ones used in Snowdonia. Alaric and I responded at the appropriate times, following Johan's lead.

“And now,” he continued, “each of you please stretch one hand through the veil. Nieve, you must prick your finger on the tip of the stalagmite below, and at the same time, Alaric you must prick your finger on the tip of the stalactite above.”

Taking a breath, I reached out with my free hand, hesitating a moment before I pushed it through the veil. Alaric did the same, and we glanced at each other. He nodded, and we pressed our ring fingers onto the surprisingly sharp stone, drawing several drops of blood. We pulled away, watching as Alaric's blood dripped down from the stalactite to mingle with my own and slowly trickle down the face of the damp stone together.

As we pulled our hands back through the veil, a sudden energy swept across my body, like a spring breeze full of blooming rose scent or the warmth of a fire on your back after coming in from a winter's night. My mouth dropped open in surprise at the sensation. Alaric's hand jumped in mine, and I looked up to find his widened eyes on mine.

He took my free hand with his, holding it up to examine it. “Your cut is healed. So is mine.”

I looked down and sure enough, our fingers showed no sign of the blood that was given. I blinked. *Was that what that feeling was?* But the lingering warmth I felt didn't seem to be connected to the cut that had been on my finger. It hovered over my heart, an uncomfortable comfort.

“And now, young man, you may kiss your bride,” Johan said, with a papery smile.

My eyes shot back to Alaric. I had forgotten about the kiss. Quite often, upper-class marriages in Snowdonia did not include the custom, as it was considered crass, and half of those marriages were arranged. But I knew from attending weddings in the village where I grew up, it was an important part of their ceremonies and marked the start of the new relationship.

Alaric cleared his throat. *He’s so tall. Even if he is going to kiss me right now, he’ll have to stoop down so much. I wish I could stand on a stool or something. How silly that would look!*

Suddenly, I realized that Alaric—yes, Alaric, my childhood sweetheart, the one that got away and took my heart with him, the man who was now my reluctant husband, *that* Alaric—was actually stooping down to give me a kiss.

In a rush, I pushed myself up on my tiptoes to meet him halfway, but just as our lips met in what was probably going to be a peck on the lips, I lost my balance slightly. My arms went up to catch myself as I teetered, and I ended up leaning against his chest to get my balance as his hands went to my waist. I gasped, my lips parting a little just as I met his.

He was still under my hands, his muscular frame tense. I froze, even as the desire to explore his full lips with my own wriggled its way into my mind. He tasted like sunshine and honey and everything good in the world, and I wanted to sink into that feeling.

As he pulled away, the urge to prolong that glimpse of bliss made me rise up on my toes even more, following him without thought. He paused, his hands tightening on me for the most thrilling moment of my entire life, then pulled back swiftly. I opened my eyes to catch a glimpse of confusion in his before he turned away, wordlessly capturing my hand again and looking back at Johan.

A blush of shame lit up my face and tears stung. I refused to let them fall. It was mortifying that my emotions had conquered me so far as to make me chase him for a kiss! *I won’t let my disappointment show now too. At least not in front of Johan.*

Alaric was obviously able to keep up the facade of the happy couple, even though he clearly hadn’t felt what I had during our kiss. *I can keep up*

the show too. I won't let him down, and I won't bother him with my silliness. I can at least do that when he's done so much for me.

"I now pronounce you husband and wife," Johan announced with a chuckle. "And it seems we have a true blushing bride on our hands. Well, I am glad I did not stand upon tradition then and make you wait to be married in a larger ceremony." He made a shallow bow in our direction as I partially hid my face behind Alaric's meaty shoulder. "Now, begone. I am sure you do not wish our company any longer. The magic of the veil has recorded your marriage more securely than the clerks in the Hall of Records, and that is saying something!"

"Come on," Bernadine murmured, turning away from the shimmering column we still stood around and heading back toward the door. "They'll be staying at my house during their honeymoon," she called back to Johan. "I let them know they would be less likely to be disturbed there."

I flushed again, embarrassed at what she was implying when I knew full well that even if we weren't planning to flee, it would be the furthest thing from Alaric's mind. The fact that it *wouldn't* be the furthest thing from my mind was probably even more embarrassing.

"Congratulations, my dears," Winola said, beaming from ear to ear as she came up and squeezed both of us in a hug. "May you have many happy years together ahead of you."

I murmured a thank you as Alaric dipped his head then started following after Bernadine, tugging me along gently.

The walk to Bernadine's house—manor, more like—was longer than I expected and fraught with tension. Alaric kept hold of my hand, to my surprise and relief. The longer we walked, the tighter my nerves wound up, the specter of my attackers lurking around every corner. But after climbing down several levels of the city as it wound its way down the mountain, we eventually arrived at Bernadine's house without incident, and, according to Bernadine and Alaric, without being followed.

In contrast to Winola's house, which had been lit with soft lamps and was full of cozy nooks and crannies, Bernadine's house was spare and quiet. It was large, built away from the cliff face on the bottom level of the city, on a little spur of land that jutted into a wide, still lake. As we passed through her house, traversing two floors and several hallways, we passed a number of people who nodded at us but didn't stop to chat. They didn't look like close family members, and given the size of Bernadine's house, I wondered if she lived with other members of her clan in addition to her family. *Actually, she hasn't spoken about her family at all. Does she even have one?*

Finally, we made it to a sort of mud room in the lower level of the house. It was pitch black outside, but I could hear water lapping against the walls outside the windows.

Bernadine walked over to two packs, one much larger than the other, and put the small bag of charms into the larger one, pulling out a few first.

"Here," she said, motioning for us to come over and placing two charms in my hand and one in Alaric's. "I've given the hiding charm to Nieve. It will look less suspicious if anyone sees a young man in hunter's garb walking alone in the country than a young woman with no obvious woodcraft at all."

I nodded, too nervous to be offended by her words. The charms were smooth in my hand and beautiful—polished pieces of amethyst and garnet that reflected the light around strange-looking runes. Bernadine ran through the commands that activated them, enabling even someone without magic, like Alaric, to activate them, then turned to run through the list of things one of her clansmen had packed for us after she sent a message earlier.

My drawing supplies, I remembered with anguish I didn't bother voicing. They were still back at Winola's. *To think we had lugged them all the way from Snowdonia.* But there was no time to go back for them. And we didn't have room in our bags to carry them across Charmagne. *Just another part of myself I need to leave behind.*

Bernadine pulled out a set of clothing from the smaller pack and turned to me, handing me two pairs of leggings, an undershirt, a tunic, and a heavy gray cloak. "Change into these, Nieve. Your boots look sturdy enough, but the dress you came in won't pair well with traveling through Charmagne in the middle of winter." She cracked a small smile and I smiled back softly.

“Thank you, Bernadine. You’ve thought of everything. I hope someday I can repay your kindness.”

Bernadine grimaced. “Alaric has already repaid it tenfold for the both of you through his work helping mages in Snowdonia. Although some council members have apparently forgotten it, providing refuge for mages was the reason the Dwarven Republic was originally founded. So if you can find peace and a new life in Spindle where you can flourish as a mage, then the small effort I’ve taken on your behalf will be well spent.”

Touched, I nodded and turned away to the washroom that she indicated with a choked feeling in my throat. I changed quickly, aware that we needed to be going before Brenner’s men found out where we were, as well as trying to minimize the time my skin was exposed to the cold air.

When I came back out, Bernadine was finishing a set of instructions to Alaric. “When you arrive, one of my clansmen will find you and get you across the inlet back into Charmagne. He’s water skilled like me, so he’ll be able to get you across easily. Once you’re on the other bank, you’ll be on your own. The council has tried to keep our presence in Charmagne limited to only the necessary smuggling routes, and right now, I don’t have anyone free to guide you.”

“If you can get us across the water, these charms will be enough to get across Charmagne on our own,” Alaric responded, motioning me over to his side when he caught sight of me.

“Good,” Bernadine replied, sticking her hand out to shake his hand and then mine. “Calm waters and fair tides to you both, and may the Red Queen go before you.”

Alaric nodded stiffly, and I smiled back tears, grateful once again at all the help she had given us. “If we meet friends such as you in Spindle, then we will truly be blessed. Thank you,” I replied, and Bernadine flashed me another one of her seemingly rare smiles.

She motioned for us to follow, leading us through a door onto a small wharf that stretched past the length of her house and had dozens of small docks extending into the water. She indicated a fragile looking canoe that was secured to one of the docks, helping Alaric load our packs into it. Alaric climbed down in, steadying the craft against the dock before motioning for me.

Gingerly, I sat down on the edge of the wharf, and tried to ignore the riot in my chest as he lifted me down beside him. Too soon, and yet not fast enough, I was seated on one of the boards that served as a bench and Alaric was untying the canoe. I didn't see any paddles in the boat and shot a worried look at Bernadine, but she didn't notice my concern. She had her eyes closed and was whispering to herself as she stretched her hands toward our boat.

Alaric finished untying the boat and took his seat across from me. As he did so, water surged around us, silent and thin as a pane of glass. We were enclosed in a tube of rushing water, roiling in a way that was reminiscent of the rainbow vale. With a shock, I realized that the water wasn't actually rushing, we were rushing, speeding through a tunnel of liquid at a much quicker rate than I was comfortable with. Just as I was beginning to breathe again, it collapsed, the water falling back as silently as it had risen. We had safely landed on the far side of the lake.

Alaric helped me out onto the shore, and with one last look across at the twinkling lights of Bernadine's house, we turned to start yet another journey.

Chapter Twelve

Alaric

Powdery snow crunched under Nieve's boots as she walked to the next tent peg. The sound grated on my ears, even though the potential for it to alert any pursuers to our presence was slight, certainly less obvious than the small tent we were constructing. But years of training to be absolutely silent in the forest or risk death or loss of prey couldn't be easily ignored. Drawing a noiseless breath through my nose, I let it go and focused on securing the tent pegs on my side.

Our shelter was tiny, basically just a large oilskin cloth that could be tied to a tree branch and then staked down. A second oilskin had been provided as a barrier against the ground, and as we finished securing it, I showed Nieve how to lay it out so that snow wouldn't drift in between the two cloths.

While she finished, I did what I could to obscure the tracks around our camp. *Not that it would really keep anyone from finding us. We'll have to rely on the charm Nieve has.* Pausing to stretch for a moment before I went back, I closed my eyes against the rosy dawn that was filtering through dark pines.

The forest was serene, snow muffling any nearby animals. No wind stirred the trees, and everything except the softly chirping birds seemed to be sleeping. I cocked my ear, listening. *There are a lot more birds in these woods than I would have imagined. I've lived in forests all my life, especially as a Huntsman, but this one is by far the noisiest in terms of birds.* I also knew that no two forests were alike, so if this one had contentedly chattering birds, the next may house too many squirrels.

Shrugging my shoulders, I went back to the tent and slipped inside. After walking all night, Nieve was already snuggled under her cloak, fast asleep,

her heat charm clutched in her hand.

I took a moment to study her without fear of revealing myself. She had tied her dark hair back in a braid, but clumps of it had slipped out, some of them falling across her face like shadow.

Does she seem smaller somehow? She had always been delicate, but in the years since I had last seen her, I had assumed she had grown more. Instead, she probably wasn't much taller than she was at sixteen, whereas I had grown another six inches at least.

I had grown more grim, too; I knew it. I was more impatient, more skilled with blade and bow, and less troubled by the questionable situations I found myself in as a Huntsman and spy. I had fought monsters at the Wasteland, pursued missions for the queen that were less than savory, lied through my teeth to people of all walks of life—a traitor to the crown and a mage sympathizer.

Nieve was still Nieve. Delicate, kind, innocent. If we hadn't been a good match before, we certainly weren't now. *We're married, but we're further apart than ever.*

I shook my head. I could deal with the weight of what that meant later. Right now, I needed to focus on the mission: getting her safely to Spindle. And that meant getting a good night—or day's—sleep so I would be fresh enough to guide us later. *The faster we get out of the Republic, the better.*

Moving as quietly as I could, I removed my boots and pulled some rations out of one of the packs to eat cold. My stomach filled, I put my confidence in Winola's charm and fell asleep almost as soon as I laid down.

I awoke sometime after noon, listening to the sound of Nieve's deep breathing, then listening to the sound of the forest around to make sure nothing was amiss. *Nothing but bird chatter.* A good sign. If they had been quiet, I would have been worried.

Nieve woke up as I began pulling more rations out of our pack. I handed some bread and hard cheese to her, which she accepted gratefully. Her

discomfort with the necessary intimacy of waking up in a tent together was obvious by her blush. The same blush that was on her face when Johan asked if she loved me. He had interpreted it as the shyness of a maiden, but I knew it to be her discomfort at lying instead, and that knowledge ate away at my heart. *Focus on the mission. We need to get to the rendezvous before dawn tomorrow.*

“Let’s get ready as quickly as we can,” I told Nieve quietly. “If we get to the rendezvous while it’s still dark, the mage should be able to get us across the channel tonight. Once we’re on Charmagnian soil, we should be a little safer from Brenner’s men.”

Nieve swallowed heavily. “Okay. Other than being half-starved, I’m feeling surprisingly well after a good sleep. And Winola’s suppression charm is still working—no headache!” She tore another piece of bread off and popped it into her mouth.

We packed everything away efficiently, if not quietly on Nieve’s part. *It’s not that she’s noisy. She’s actually quieter than most people. She just doesn’t have an ear for the forest.*

“What beautiful birdsong,” she remarked, cocking her head to listen with a sweet smile as I helped secure her pack. I frowned, the noise of the birds intruding on my thoughts again.

“Yes, there do seem to be a lot of them around here. More than we have in Snowdonian forests.”

“Maybe you just didn’t pay any attention to them before,” she chided gently.

I stared after her with wide eyes as she started drifting toward the path we had been following last night, re-braiding her tangled hair. *Didn’t pay attention to them before?* I knew Nieve had been raised in a backwater, but as princess, I had expected that she would have learned more about how her country worked once she reached the age of apprenticeship, especially about those who guarded the royal family. We not only guarded the royals, we patrolled our forests, secured food for the royal court, and fought when required at the border of the Wasteland.

Huntsmen were trained from the very first day to pay attention to the noises of the forest, especially the sounds of the animals. If you understood how the wildlife around you *should* sound, you would know something was wrong long before you could see it.

That's what was frustrating me about this forest. *It seems like the ones in Snowdonia, but everything is just a bit different. The pines are scrubbier, the needles thinner, the soil is sandier. Although there's snow on the ground, it's thin and powdery, not the thick covering that rests all winter long in Snowdonia.* I shifted on my feet uneasily. There was nothing wrong with the forest, it was just unfamiliar. And I didn't want a potential enemy to catch up with us in a place where I couldn't read the signs properly.

Despite Nieve's delicate appearance, she showed no sign of flagging during our pace the rest of the night. We arrived at the rendezvous site without incident, connecting with an agent I had worked with twice before when smuggling mages out of Snowdonia.

Martel was a friendly man, someone you would never guess could be involved in espionage. He had a very successful fishing enterprise, which was a perfect cover for getting people across the channel if needed.

A water crafter like Bernadine, he couldn't draw power from the water itself like she did. Instead of a swirling tunnel, he simply got into the back of his fishing boat with us, put his hand in the saltwater, and used his magic to propel us forward.

The method had less finesse but it got the job done just as well. "Not as many Charmagnian water patrols as there used to be," he said to us as we were getting out of the boat. "But they'll probably start up again. There's rumors that the treaty with Snowdonia has been renewed, and Pelerin no longer requires their aid at the Wasteland. Hopefully you don't run into any troops returning through their northern hills on your way."

I nodded, half wishing he hadn't said anything when I saw the fear in Nieve's eyes.

A good spy welcomes any information he can get. If you grow soft on her account, she will pay. I thanked Martel and shook hands as we parted ways.

The first leg of our journey in Charmagne was grueling but uneventful. We worked our way north in the forests by the channel, staying away from where any Charmagnian water patrols would be working, but keeping to the safety of the trees.

When we finally worked our way above the famous Charmagnian inland sea—camping one night in a spot with a far-off view of it one day—we were forced to leave the cover of the forest to track east through brush-covered hills.

At that point, Nieve became our main navigator. Using our map, which was an old copy of dubious origin that I had obtained from a contact in the royal archives at Machturm Castle, she drew on her training as a cartographer to predict the best way forward each morning. Combined with my field experience, we were usually able to successfully avoid even small settlements during our weeks of travel. The only close call was when we were forced to cross one of the main thoroughfares. As Martel predicted, it was being used by soldiers returning home from the Pelerine War, and we had to wait undercover for three days before the road was clear enough to cross without being seen.

The biggest challenge was feeding ourselves. Although it was winter, the air in Charmagne was markedly warmer, and there was no snow on the hard ground. It made obscuring our tracks easy, but it was also harder to spot animal tracks on hard dirt. Still, my training made hunting easy enough. But the first night I brought back game to eat, Nieve cried while she ate it.

“One of the first animals I heard was a rabbit,” she explained when I asked what was wrong. “It was so—” she broke off shaking her head. She finished her meal, but I could read disgust on her face every time she ate what I killed.

The further we got into Charmagne, the more comfortable I felt spending some time to forage for berries and roots, but even so, the potential for discovery was too high to let us slow down for long. Her pain broke me a little every time we ate, and I found myself glad I didn’t have her magical abilities.

Finally, after almost a month of careful travel, the Spindalian border rose up before us.

“It’s breathtaking,” Nieve whispered, drawing my attention from my hunt for a signal I knew should be appearing any minute. My lips curved into a tiny smile at the wonder on her face, then I looked back at the ancient forest which sprang up a little less than a mile away.

Instead of a meandering border, driven by chance and the wind, this forest ended abruptly, the trees growing densely up to an invisible border, and then no more. Most of them were towering, ancient things—oaks and maples and other varieties I wasn’t sure of. It was certainly an impressive sight.

“Your birds will be happy at least,” I whispered back, drawing a sheepish smile from Nieve.

We had noticed, not long after we left the Charmagnian forest in the east, that a handful of birds seemed to be following us. Fearing some magic, Nieve took off her suppression charm and attempted to speak with them. She was quickly overwhelmed by the other nearby animals, but from what she could tell, the birds were following us simply because they were curious about her. They had heard of our flight to the Republic, and having found the human who could speak to animals, didn’t want to lose her again.

She glanced around guiltily. “Yes. I haven’t tried to contact them again, but I’m sure they’re all ready to settle down. We’ve traveled such a long way.” She twisted her clasped hands together anxiously. “And I’m really glad they didn’t attract so much attention that we were found out.”

I nodded grimly. “We still have a mile to go before we’re technically safe. Help me look for the signal. It should begin to shine three hours after dark.” I stepped close behind Nieve, stooping to her height and pointing in the general direction. “Somewhere over there.”

She nodded, wisps of coal-black hair brushing and catching against my scruffy beard and sending leaving tingles in their wake. I straightened up quickly and cleared my throat as I stepped back. “We’re in the right spot, between those two hills,” I explained, motioning behind us. “I’ve been this way once before, but it was ten years ago.”

Nieve snapped her eyes to mine. “With Ritter?”

I nodded. Memories of that journey had been plaguing me the closer we got to Charmagne. We had come through Pelerine to get out of Snowdonia, but had entered Spindle using the exact same signal light. That trip had been my first rescue, the journey made easier by a high-level contact in Pelerine. It had been shorter, but no less fraught with danger as I was confronting my own prejudices against mages and the way they tested the love between us brothers—not to mention the danger of getting him to refuge.

Nieve’s hand crept into mine in quiet comfort, the first time she had touched me since our marriage ceremony. A lump formed in my throat at the kind gesture and the reminder of what I wished our relationship could be.

A light flickered in the distance, the only one for miles on the other side of the trees. “There,” I said hoarsely, pointing with my free hand.

“Finally,” Nieve breathed beside me, slipping her hand out of mine and hoisting her pack higher on her shoulders. “Let’s go.”

The last mile seemed to take forever. My heart pounded faster than it should be considering the pace we set. But as safety drew ever closer, I was more and more aware that our trust lay in a hiding charm meant for one person and the cover of a moonless night. *It’s enough. By all the Shepherds and the Fae, too, we’re going to make it.*

As we crossed the boundary into the forest, a burden lifted from my shoulders, and I couldn’t help releasing a deep sigh. Not all my worries were eased in an instant, but after weeks in rolling hills surrounded by patchy undergrowth and intermittent farmland, to be protected from sight by trees again was a relief.

The signal light was clearly visible ahead of us, a tiny flickering beacon. In a few minutes we found ourselves climbing a set of stairs inside a ruined tower, sturdy enough despite the crumbling edges. They brought us to a landing, which opened to an old room in the castle. There, the beacon burned steadily, sending hope out into the night through a gap where a wall used to be. The only hint that the flames weren’t natural was the fact that there was no visible fuel sustaining it, nor did it give off heat. Otherwise, it looked for all the world like any small campfire I had made on a cold winter’s night.

Hesitating only a moment, I pushed my hand into the flame, recalling the instructions I had given refugees dozens of times over the years. When I had been here before, Ritter had put his hand in the fire, and this was the room where we had parted ways. *Will he be on the other side?* It was almost impossible that he would be the one to fetch us, but I couldn’t help the sliver of hope in my heart.

“Are you sure I don’t need to put my hand in too?” Nieve asked, her reluctance to actually do so written all over her face. I had explained what we would need to do at the beacon the day before, but I’m sure it was strange watching me actually put my hand into apparent flames.

“I don’t think so. They’ll come as soon as they know someone is here,” I reassured her, pulling my hand out again. In a few steps, I was by her side again, facing the entryway where I remembered one of the fairies appearing ten years ago. Nieve did the same, and we waited in silence.

Sure enough, only a minute later, a woman stepped through the doorway, seemingly from thin air. Although I was confident that whoever answered our summons would be an ally, the sudden appearance still made my skin crawl. *What could someone like me do against magic like that?*

“Welcome, travelers,” she greeted us, her voice low but friendly. “Are you in need of aid?”

“We come seeking refuge,” I replied, scrutinizing the woman carefully.

She wore a rather drab cloak over an unremarkable dress. Her dark hair spilled around her shoulders in waist-length waves. Although a little older, she looked familiar. *I think it’s the same fairy that took Ritter.*

Nieve shifted beside me, brushing against my elbow. I took her hand in mine, and she didn’t resist. “My—wife,” I said, stumbling slightly over the word wife, “is a mage and is no longer welcome in the country we were born in.”

The woman shot a sympathetic look at Nieve. “If that is so, you are welcome here.” She turned her attention back to me and paused. “I believe we have met before, traveler,” she said, scrutinizing my face.

“I believe we have as well. I am Alaric, brother of Ritter Weidmann.”

The fairy visibly relaxed. “So I thought. It has been many years since I met the two of you. Come, let’s get back to the Academy.”

She motioned for us to follow, then walked through the doorway into the crumbling stairwell. Instead of continuing down the stairs, she simply vanished.

Nieve gasped, and although I was expecting it, the strangeness of seeing someone disappear was unsettling. “Come on. Ritter went this way too. We’ll go together.”

She chewed on her lip, her forehead creased, but after a moment, she nodded. I squeezed her hand and we stepped through the doorway as one.

It didn’t feel like anything, just the same as taking a step through a doorway would normally. Still, we both wobbled a bit, and Nieve nearly fell over as our eyes adjusted to the sudden change in our surroundings.

Somehow, our step through the spelled portal took us into a different room entirely. It appeared to be an office, judging by the massive mahogany desk directly in front of us. When I glanced back to see if the doorway was still behind us, it was gone. In its place was a wall, covered entirely by a floor to ceiling map, which we had apparently just stepped out of. The

country on the map was Spindle, I realized as my eyes adjusted to the change, but detailed to an extent I couldn't have ever imagined. Nieve seemed even more enthralled. *To a cartographer, a map like **that** is probably the stuff of dreams.*

"Welcome to Deerbolt Academy," the fairy said, catching both our attention. She smiled at Nieve. "I am Violet, one of the Headmistresses here. I am also the Boundary Fairy." She gestured toward the map behind us as if that meant something. *Maybe she guards the boundaries of the country?*

Nieve nodded regally. "Thank you, Headmistress Violet. I am—" she broke off, looking at me shyly.

"This is Snow White Weidmann," I said, feeling my cheeks warm. "She's my wife."

It was the first time I had given her my last name, and the first time I had called her by the alias we had settled on—the same as her code name in the royal guard.

"So, Spindle has claimed two more of the Weidmann family," Violet said, undoing the clasp on her cloak and hanging it on a nearby hook. "Come, let's find Headmistress Gladiolus. She will know where to put you for the night."

We followed willingly, and as Nieve didn't pull away, I kept a tight hold on her hand. *Only to make our relationship convincing*, I told myself.

"You're safe now," Violet said as we walked further into the Academy. "You can rest and look to the future."

Chapter Thirteen

Nieve

The last log fit snugly into the firebox for the oven range as I pushed it into place. Sitting back, I brushed my hands off on my rough linen apron, then pushed the firebox door shut. The oven was heated using a mage-crafted charm, but it still required fuel to run.

It's lucky this cottage was used by the Headmistresses before the Academy was built. It's been fitted with every magical convenience I could dream about—and more that I didn't even know would be possible.

Still, when Headmistress Gladiolus had offered us the use of it while we settled into life in Spindle, she had warned us not to expect the type of conveniences we may have heard about in Spindle's capitol. Alaric had assured her that we wouldn't presume on that sort of thing, and I agreed—especially since I had never heard much about Spindle's capitol and whatever conveniences it contained.

I still couldn't believe how quickly we had settled into a life here in Spindle. I had expected to struggle when we arrived, especially since we had agreed to keep my identity a secret, and so wouldn't receive the type of support I could normally expect based on my title. But I needn't have worried. Alaric was well-known to the Headmistresses of the academy because of his work smuggling mages and also as the brother of Ritter, who seems to have made a name for himself in a high-ranking military unit in the time since he fled to Spindle.

Alaric wasn't widely famous like he had been in Snowdonia, but the Headmistresses claimed that their debt to him was big enough that they insisted on housing us. Once a week, either the Headmistress' ward, Briar Rose, or one of their students, Alessia, brought a delivery of food to the cottage. At first, Alaric offered to make the short trek up to the academy to

pick it up after the Headmistresses insisted we accept the gifts while we settled in, but Briar Rose had merely laughed, saying it gave her an excuse to get off campus, and Alessia had bristled, asking Alaric whether he was insinuating that she wasn't competent enough to carry it down. Thankfully she hadn't been completely offended, and over the last weeks I had begun to make cautious friends with the two younger women.

"Briar Rose will be here in a few minutes," Alaric announced as he walked into the kitchen.

I smiled, a tiny thrill chasing around my heart at the sight of Alaric walking into our kitchen as if he belonged there. I carefully put that thought away, even as I allowed myself to acknowledge my happiness at it.

Briar Rose had been finding excuses to walk down here almost every other day since we moved in, often just stopping to chat or help me with chores and then breezing off again when her friend Prince Raleigh came looking for her.

"Oh, did you see her on the path?" I asked him as he washed his hands in the stoneware sink.

The sink was another marvel. The front and back of the cottage, as well as the side facing the forest path, were built in the open like any cottage. The fourth side had been built against the edge of a small rise in the ground, so that the kitchen window was actually only a few inches above the ground on that side. This allowed a pipe to be run underground from a spring up the hill. It was attached to a burnished copper spigot which continuously piped clean water from into the sink. The water created a tinkling noise as it splashed into the sink and down the drain like our own little waterfall. There was a handle on top that was supposed to stop the flow of water when we wanted it off, but it had broken the second day after we moved in, and Alaric hadn't had a chance to repair it yet. I secretly hoped that I would learn magic quickly enough that I could do it myself.

"No," Alaric snorted, drying his hands on a kitchen towel and turning toward me. "I heard her. She was singing sea-shanties at an earsplitting volume and tromping along the path louder than a herd of cattle."

I couldn't help chuckling at his description, even as I wagged my finger at him. "That's not very flattering to Briar," I chided.

He shrugged. "That's not my fault. She's the one singing loud enough to crack stone. You'd think growing up in the middle of a forest, she would

have learned to move around it without a sound.”

My grin softened into a bittersweet smile. “She’s probably just always felt safe. She’s not a huntress, so what need would she have of moving without being heard? I certainly never thought about that until you taught me on our flight to Spindle.”

“You were much quieter than her to begin with, though,” Alaric replied somberly.

“Yes, but I’m a quiet person by nature. And if I had been galumphing around the court like a—what was it? A herd of cattle? Well, it would have been hard to live that down. Briar seems like she’s lived a very free, unfettered sort of life,” I said wistfully.

Alaric pushed one side of his mouth up, the best he could do in terms of smiles at this point. “Hopefully my stealth in the woods is going to pay off for us.”

I nodded, the sight of his half smile making me warm inside. *Maybe he is feeling safer too since we got here.* “That’s what Briar is coming over for—she wanted to help me prepare everything since selling venison skewers at the Founding Day Fair was her idea. She said she would chop the meat so I just have to do the vegetables.”

Alaric nodded. “Then I think I’ll go check my traps one more time before I chop more firewood.”

I shuddered but nodded. Eating meat had become a trial for me ever since my magic had begun letting me hear animals’ thoughts. I had only taken my magical suppression charm off a few times since I arrived in Spindle, once to try and communicate to the birds that had followed me here, and twice during visits to the Headmistresses as they assessed my magical talent. Still, the memory of their thoughts made the idea of eating animals intolerable.

“Maybe she brings news of Ritter,” I said gently, eying Alaric with concern.

After we arrived, Headmistress Violet had inquired at the capitol for news of Alaric’s brother. She had been authorized to reveal that he was on a foreign mission, but presumed missing.

As stoic as Alaric always was, it had obviously been a blow to him. He hadn’t said much, but I knew he had hoped to reconnect with Ritter once we made the decision to come to Spindle. My heart ached at the thought that the reunion was delayed—maybe permanently.

“Yes, maybe,” was his only response before padding quietly out of the kitchen.

In the silence he left behind, I could hear Briar’s voice belting out a highly inappropriate chorus of one of the sea shanties she loved singing. Her voice was lovely, but the volume at which she was singing was a little too much.

I stifled a laugh and turned back to the stove, checking to make sure it was heating up nicely. While we were preparing for the fair tomorrow, I wanted to have one of the few meals I actually knew how to make simmering in the background.

As a princess, I hadn’t been required to learn menial tasks, and for the large part, I didn’t. But growing up in the country—and especially under the authority of someone like Agatha—I had pitched in whenever there was a need.

At apple harvest, we all worked from sunup to sundown. For me, that meant helping to peel, cut or preserve the apples and cook the ones we wanted to use right away. Looking back, I certainly hadn’t been working as quickly as the servants, but I had learned over the years to make applesauce, apple preserves, apple pie, and apple bread.

I could also make wild rice soup, but only because it was one of Agatha’s favorite dishes, and over the years, it had become one of mine too. When I was little, I would sit and watch her making it from start to finish so often that she began letting me do each steps alongside her.

As I dumped the chopped garlic, onion, and root vegetables into the soup pot to begin frying, Briar yelled out to me from the front door. “Snow! I’m here!”

“Come in!” I called back, mentally reminding myself of my new name. “I’m in the kitchen!”

After a moment of bustling around in the sitting room while she hung up her coat and took off her boots, she walked through the door and strode right over to the table. With a thump, she plunked a moderately sized crate down on the table.

“The Headmistresses sent some more spices once they heard of your scheme to sell food at the fair. Do either you or Alaric know woodworking? One of you is going to have to build a spice cabinet pretty soon, or you’ll be tripping over them every time you move!”

My eyes widened as I came over to the table. The crate didn't have a lid on it, so I could see dozens of spice bags, each tied closed with twine and a small label attached, on which an elegant script noted the type of spice or herb the bag contained.

"This crate probably cost as much as this whole cottage!" I gasped, touched at the gesture.

Suddenly I remembered that Alaric would want to pay for the spices. *Most people would pay for such a gift, wouldn't they?* I had always received an allowance from the court on top of whatever my manor lands made, so I never had to pay attention to things like that.

"Briar, we can't afford all of these right now. Could I pick out one or two and pay the Headmistresses after the fair?"

Briar gave me a crooked smile, filled with understanding. "I was instructed by Gladiolus herself to take them down to you as a gift. You've seen enough of them to know what they're like. If they didn't want to help you, they simply wouldn't." She wrinkled her nose. "Well, they would probably help you, but their help would consist of setting you up somewhere far away where they could forget about you. They're too busy to bother with people they don't like."

My cheeks warmed at the roundabout compliment. "They're too generous," I murmured, making Briar laugh again.

"They can be, yes! But I've come to expect it over the years. They're a bit eccentric, but they're good friends to have. Anyway, shall we get to chopping?"

I hurried back over to my soup pot, calling over my shoulder as I stirred the vegetables around a little to prevent them from burning, "If you don't mind setting that crate in the corner, we can work on the table. There's an apron hanging by the door that you can use."

I added the stock and seasonings to my soup, and then left it to simmer while Briar and I started preparing the skewers to be roasted and sold tomorrow at the fair. It felt good to settle into this new identity, safe from being used to further anyone else's agenda or as a weapon to destabilize my family. And although I was working harder than I ever had and still had so much to learn, I knew Alaric would stay by my side as we figured out what our new life together would look like.



It was the morning after the Vernal Equinox Fair in the village. It had been another successful day selling vegetable and venison skewers, even better than our first time at the Founding Day celebration a few months ago. I sat at the kitchen table, my hands wrapped around a mug of steaming tea, the remains of my egg and potato hash on the stoneware plate in front of me.

Although spring was now officially here, a brittle wind rattled the window panes, and I could see the bare tree branches dancing to its tune across the yard.

Yesterday had been mild, perfect for a fair. We had received a steady stream of lovers at our stall all day. Some were in love and knew it, like Luca and Ella, some were in love and didn't know it, like Raleigh and Briar Rose, but all were full of good cheer and hope for the future. It made my heart ache even as I felt happy for them.

But today's weather matched my heart-scape a little better. The sun was shining, the promise of better days ahead was within reach, but it was still cold. Despite my best efforts, it was a struggle most days to keep my own heart from growing cold.

Sometimes I wondered what had happened in Snowdonia after my death had been reported. Most days I could tell myself that no news was good news, but my heart ached for Agatha and my brothers, believing I was dead—maybe having been told that I was an evil mage who had gone insane, or whatever story the queen had concocted. I hadn't seen the boys very often in the last couple of years, but we had always had fun together, and I had written to them often.

I couldn't bear to think of the queen. I refused to call her stepmother, as I vacillated between anger at the wickedness she had sunk to and heartbreak for who she used to be. I worried for the boys' future. I worried for my estate. I worried that Agatha would tie herself to Asylbrunn in my memory instead of seeking comfort with Reiner and finally letting herself be happy. I worried for the mages that Alaric could have been helping if he hadn't bound himself to me.

I worried most of all for Alaric. My life had changed because my choices had dwindled to either running or dying. His life changed because he chose to help me. If he hadn't gotten involved or just followed orders, he could be living the life he had created for himself; a life of danger and heroism. Now he was stuck in endless days doing small things: checking traps and hunting game; fixing and building things around the cottage; hoping each day to learn news of his brother. He never seemed able to let down his guard, even with people we knew we could trust. He certainly didn't let down his guard with me.

That's not completely true. He has talked about his fears over Ritter. And he lets me walk to the Academy with Briar Rose or Alessia sometimes, instead of insisting on escorting me himself. I snorted. The walk to Deerbolt Academy was only twenty minutes at most, and being this close to the triple warded school for knights and royals, there was hardly a safer place in the entire country. Still, Alaric was always vigilant for our safety.

"I'm surprised you have the energy to laugh this early in the morning," Alaric teased, making me jump and slosh my tea over the sides of my mug.

Thankfully none had landed on my mother's shawl that I had wrapped around my shoulders. I could feel my cheeks heating up while I rubbed at the spilled tea with a nearby dishcloth, embarrassed that he had appeared without me knowing—especially since I had been thinking of him.

I offered him a rueful smile, and my heart tripped over itself when he smiled back. It was the first real smile I had seen on his face since we made it to Spindle. *No, since we were kids, really.* It transformed his face. The tight set to his mouth and the wrinkles on his brow had all been smoothed away.

Did he meet someone at the fair? I felt a quick dart of shame. *Of course he hadn't. We were together the entire time. And he's not the sort that would break our vows, even though we aren't...*

"Is there more hot water for tea?" he asked, breaking me out of my spiral of thoughts.

"Yes—it's in the kettle. It should still be hot enough." I took another sip of my own tea, swallowing a little too much and almost choking.

He nodded and walked over to the stove, thankfully unaware of my clumsiness. I watched as he set about making his drink, then dished himself a bowl of eggs and potato hash as well, the only sound in the room was the

tinkling of water from our still broken sink faucet and the scrape of utensils on pans.

Finally he came over to the table, pulling out the chair next to me instead of the one across as he usually did when we ate breakfast together. His proximity was distracting, pressing uncomfortably on the feelings I had been untangling before he walked in—the feeling of holding your heart’s desire but not having it, of being so close to Alaric but not close *with* him.

The worst part of all is that we’re actually living out what he asked of me all those years ago, but in word only. I repressed the urge to sigh. It might be too late to ever win back his heart, but I could love him with all my heart, and train myself to expect nothing for it.

“I had some news yesterday,” Alaric said, turning toward me. His smile was still intact, and I felt my curiosity grow. *Whatever it is, if it’s making him this happy, it has to be good.* I waited for him to continue, but he took a big bite of eggs, seemingly oblivious to my interest.

“Well?!” I demanded, unable to keep a smile off my face as he started grinning. It felt good to see him so relaxed—almost carefree.

“Prince Raleigh told me himself. They’ve had news of Ritter. He’s alive!”

I gasped, my eyes wide. “Where is he!? Is he alright? Can you see him?” My questions tumbled over each other as I searched his eyes. His smile turned a little more cautious, but didn’t dim.

“He’s okay. Prince Raleigh said that he had been caught behind enemy lines and was badly hurt, but that he will be heading back to Spindle as soon as he’s well enough to travel. I don’t know how long until I can see him, but Prince Raleigh promised he would arrange for it.”

I squealed and launched myself at him, wrapping my arms around his neck in a tight squeeze, my heart full of joy for the two brothers. Alaric rocked back under my assault, then wrapped his arms around me as well in a tight hug.

After a moment, I pulled back. He let me go and drew in a deep breath. “I’m so relieved. I thought—well, it doesn’t matter. I feel I can breathe now that I know he’s safe.”

“I know. I know it was weighing on you. It was hard to hope... but now you have a reunion to look forward to! Family, actual family for you here in Spindle!”

“For us, you know. He’s your family too.”

I crooked a smile and turned away, hoping he wouldn’t catch sight of the fluttering feelings that were almost bound to show on my face. “Yes, of course. My brother-in-law! I wonder what he’ll think about that?”

“He’ll be happy for us, don’t worry.”

He won’t be if Alaric tells him what’s really going on—that he’s stuck with me forever even though he doesn’t love me.

“I can’t wait to see him,” I assured Alaric. “I hope he can come and stay with us when he’s back!”

Alaric hummed his agreement, and I stole a glance at him as I cleaned up my breakfast dishes. My heart was warm to see how happy he was, and relieved to know that Ritter would be okay. *My own feelings of being heartsick don’t matter in comparison to things like this,* I admonished myself.

“I have a lesson scheduled with Headmistress Lilac,” I reminded Alaric. “I can walk up myself, so you can take your time with breakfast.”

“No, no,” he replied, taking a swig of tea. “You know I like to walk you up. Can’t be too careful.”

“If you’re sure. I like the company anyway,” I told him daringly, then dashed out of the kitchen to collect my things.

What has gotten into me?! ‘I like the company?’ Really? Hopefully my flirting is so tepid that Alaric doesn’t even catch wind of it. I need to focus!

To distract myself as I packed my small bag and put on my cloak, I reviewed what I had learned at my last lesson, which had been with Headmistress Violet. *Magic is connection, a bond between the participants and the sacred life force of the magic. So long as we work within the purpose of the object, we can shape it to connect to others more fully.*

“Honestly I still don’t know what that means, except that maybe we’re all connected? And magic connects us even more?” I muttered, fastening my cloak and making sure my suppression charm was fine.

I looked forward to lessons with Lilac the most. She specialized in creature magic, and we spent most of our sessions working on my natural magic, which she was endlessly interested in. I still wore my charm when I was out and about, but I was progressing so well that oftentimes I would take it off if I was at the cottage. I knew the animals around our house so well, and had tight enough control of putting a wall between them and me

for privacy, that the charm was no longer needed. But I had a long way to go until I was skilled enough to block out animals I didn't know.

Alaric appeared behind me, reaching an arm around to pull his own cloak off its peg. The scent of him distracted me from all the work I had been doing to focus on my lessons, and I wanted to stamp my foot at the unfairness of it.

I wish I could affect him as badly as he affects me. I shook my head at the uncharitable thought and instead opened the door.

"Ready?" I asked, looking back to make sure he was coming. He nodded and we started down the path.

Chapter Fourteen

Barrett

“Remember our plan,” I instructed Koen as we approached the doors to my mother’s audience chamber. My audience chamber, I reminded myself bitterly. It was technically mine, although I still hadn’t reached the age of maturity yet. Even so, I was King of Snowdonia, and had been for years by now—though in name only. But that will change next year, and if we want the transition to go smoothly, mother has to start allowing me into the daily operations of court.

“I will,” my brother reassured me, his boots clipping against the polished stone floor in time with mine, “but I still think this is a mistake. You risk poking a hornet’s nest.” My heart skipped a beat at his warning.

“I know. But it’s time—past time. And she’s only getting worse. It’s for all our good if I start shouldering some of the work.” Koen grunted his disagreement beside me but didn’t argue. For although he was only twelve, *almost thirteen*, I reminded myself, he acted like an old man sometimes. *Growing up at Machturm Castle will do that to anyone.* It was one reason I was so jealous of my older sister. *Was jealous.* Now she was beyond such worries. And I had one less support as I took on the mantle of kingship.

One of the Huntsmen posted at the chamber doors turned to open them and announce our presence, but I forestalled him with a sharp command.

“There’s no need to announce me into my own audience chamber,” I told him as we came to a stop before the door. He glanced at his counterpart in only partially hidden surprise as Koen made to open the door for us. It swung on well-oiled hinges, and Koen and I passed through before the guards could react.

As my brother closed the door silently behind us, my eyes adjusted to the gloom of the audience chamber. After a moment, I saw my mother, and

predictably, the High Inquisitor, in the alcove behind the throne, facing the strange mirror my mother kept there. *They haven't noticed us.* As Koen turned away from the door, I put my hand out to stop his movements before we were noticed and strained my ears to listen as my mother began to speak.

“Mirror, mirror on the wall, who in this land will be its downfall?”

I shot a look of surprise at Koen, who was staring at her with a deep frown. I refocused on the scene at the other end of the room, just in time to see the dark sheen of the mirror's surface move, ripples churning outward and then bouncing in on themselves until they arranged themselves into the approximation of a face—somewhat like my mother's, but different enough that I had a sick feeling that it was not a reflection, but another entity entirely. My intuition was confirmed when the mirror *spoke*. Every hair on the back of my neck raised, as the muted, toneless voice pronounced:

“Your reign, fair queen, will be no more, when Nieve brings swords to this chamber door.”

“No!” My mother gasped, as if she had been hit by a physical blow. She turned to the High Inquisitor, who stood close by her side.

“You promised! You said if I had her killed, if I gave you her heart for your potions, that my reign would be safe! That Barrett would be safe!”

Her words made my heart stutter as they sank in, and Koen stiffened beside me. *Mother said Nieve was killed in an accident!* My breaths started to come a little faster even as I strained to hear the continued conversation.

“And so it would!” the High Inquisitor snarled. “Have I steered you wrong yet? She must live even now. The Huntsman lied.”

“Is it true?” my mother asked the mirror, her voice raising an octave as she turned back toward it. The mirror rippled violently in response, the face dissipating in angry wrinkles. I half held my hands up to my ears against the pressure—not quite a sound, really—that seemed to emanate from the looking glass.

The mirror spoke again, its voice still toneless, but deeper somehow, conveying anger in its strength. “One answer only are you given each day, unless the price you agree to pay.” My mother trembled, but the High Inquisitor seized her hand and held it toward the surface of the mirror.

“You know I speak with the authority of the Shepherds, queen. Even one such as you is not above the laws of the mirror. We need to know where she

is. Pay it.”

My mother strained away from the mirror for a moment. *Step away—don’t pay it!* I urged her in my mind. Just as I was about to step forward, to force her away, Koen grabbed my arm and gave me a sharp nod.

Not yet, his look said. I wrenched my arm away but stood still. *He’s right. If the mirror can show us where Nieve is, if she truly lives, then I suppose it will be worth it.*

My mother released a gasping breath, then seemed to relent. The High Inquisitor brushed something against the tip of her finger, then forced it *into* the mirror—not toward it, not against it, but into the surface itself. Again, I felt my entire understanding of the world shift. *How is that possible? And what is that thing?!*

My mother pulled her hand back out after a moment, drawing a handkerchief from her pocket to wrap her finger as she gazed eagerly at the swirling mirror.

The burnished gold and gray surface settled into a picture—a picturesque cottage covered in briars on side, blooming with wild roses. Two young women sat on the front step, chatting as they shelled something in the bowls at their feet. I squinted, then my eyes widened. The blonde one I didn’t recognize, but the dark haired one I knew well. *Nieve—she’s alive!*

I couldn’t help the startled sound of joy that left my throat at the sight of her, but as it left me, the mirror swirled dark again, and my mother and the High Inquisitor spun around.

“Boys!” my mother gasped, her face pained and gray-hued. “What are you—how much did you hear?!”

I stepped forward, Koen trailing beside me, and then stopped when we reached the middle of the room. I didn’t want to get any closer to the mirror.

“We heard all, Mother, and saw it too,” I replied, my voice wobbling slightly.

Her eyes widened at my words. “You must forget what you saw! You’re too young, you—”

Anger surged in my heart and I cut her off. “You’ve been saying that for years, but I’m *not* too young—not too young to know that you’re playing with something dangerous! *You* of all people! You taught us against the dangers of magic since before I can remember, you’ve dedicated your regency to clearing our land of it so I wouldn’t have to fight it when I came

into my own! You brought the High Inquisitor here from whatever hermitage he came from in the northern mountains to root out all the evil, as he so calls it. And now I find you—" I gestured weakly toward the mirror again, at a loss for words.

My mother drew a breath in through her nose, drawing herself together. "You do not understand, Barrett. I hate it, but I do what I must; what I must for *you*!" Her voice went shrill at the end, the echo of it grating against my ears.

I shook my head against the sound, and against her reasoning. "No. No, you can't claim that. Ordering Nieve's death cannot help me. It's unimaginable—it's despicable!"

A snarl of anger passed across her face, sending a shiver through my heart.

"Stay," the High Inquisitor said to her, ignoring me completely as he usually did. "The boy is not wrong. It will soon be time for him to come into his responsibility. Why not now? I saw enough in the mirror that the Holy Shepherds revealed the girl's location to me—just over the border in Spindle. Once we have her heart, she will no longer be a threat." My mother stared up at his cowed face, indecision written on every line of her posture. "I know a way," he continued, "I can use the mirror to transport you to her."

"Oh no," my mother said, wrapping her cloak tight around herself, her voice pleading. "I can't do it myself—I can't with my own hands! I want her dead more than anything, but I just can't."

I rocked backward at her words, and shot a hand out to steady my brother, who I knew would be just as shocked as I. We shared a glance of horror to hear our mother's depravity confirmed with her own voice.

"Who else will look to the safety of your brood better than you?" the High Inquisitor asked, his voice silky and dangerous. "You have already seen that your most trusted servants could not be relied upon to do what is necessary, have you not? So it must be you. Fear not, I will give you an artifact that will do the killing. The mirror can send you to the border of Spindle. You will simply need to walk over the border, leave the artifact at the cottage we saw, and walk back across the border. The mirror will pull you back here before anyone realizes you were there." My mother whimpered and glanced at the mirror.

“Yes,” he said, his voice lowering as he looked toward the mirror as well. “It has the power to accomplish what we need. But it will require more blood. You have given too much. We cannot wait until you have recovered. As he has asked, let the boy step into his responsibilities. He will have enough. Let him help solve his own problems.”

“No!” my mother whispered hoarsely, not looking at me. “No—not him. Someone else. Let it—let it be the Huntsman! The one who forswore himself, swearing that Nieve and the other were dead. He can pay with his life. Surely that will be enough?”

The High Inquisitor hissed but nodded. Mother nearly crumpled with relief. Koen’s shoulder stiffened under my hand.

“Mother!” I protested, taking a step forward as she turned back to me. “You can’t sacrifice someone’s life to kill Nieve as a sentence for not killing her in the first place! What madness is—”

“No!” she interrupted harshly, her face lined with anger. “You speak of what you don’t know. As the High Inquisitor said, perhaps it is time you begin to work more closely with us, for I have kept my labors from you too long maybe.” Her face twisted in hatred, and I took a step back toward Koen, my heart stuttering under the depth of her rage.

“She has *magic*,” mother continued, “so a death in service to our kingdom is more than she deserves! And before you sermonize at me, I tried—I *tried* for *years* to cure her of it, to no avail. It is only through the High Inquisitor that your throne hasn’t fallen already.” She took a step forward, her anger turning to pleading. “I have seen it, Barrett. The mirror revealed it to me. Here, in this very room, and soon by the look of it, she will storm in here with swords and evil allies and take your throne from you by force! I *cannot* allow that. So before she does it, I will do what must be done.”

“It is true, child,” the High Inquisitor said, his voice somehow beguiling and foul all at once. I felt the edges of my mind relax, succumbing to the certainty of his words even as the rest of me rebelled.

I swallowed, some traitorous part of my heart pierced by her proclamation and the threat to my future. *But what sort of future would it be if I have to kill my own sister for it, when she has done nothing to betray me—save the crime of being born a mage.*

My mind raced. What my mother didn't know was that the news of Nieve's magic was not quite the surprise she thought to me and Koen. There were many things about us that she didn't know, having been distracted over the last few years by her own plans and her desire to keep us safe. I glanced at Koen again, who stared back at me, his eyes steady.

I looked back at our mother and schooled my face into a look of contrition. "I know you have always worked for my good, Mother." I cleared my throat, hoping to inject enough confidence in it to cover my quaking nerves. "If you say one of the Huntsman is needed to protect Snowdonia against the mages, then I'm sure you don't say it without foundation. Let me prove I am ready to rule with you. Let me go get him. Tell me who, and I will bring him here directly."

My mother's face relaxed into a tired smile, and she drew a small breath. "I knew you would see sense. You aren't ready yet, my dear one, but perhaps it's time you see what being a ruler entails."

"His name is Arden Werner," the Inquisitor interrupted, not turning his cowed face away from my mother even as he spoke to me. "He is here, in the castle. Bring him, and we will secure your reign."

I drew an unsteady breath, hoping they couldn't hear my hesitation. "I'll be back shortly."

My mother smiled, putting a hand to her chest and closing her eyes in relief.

"Come," I said to my brother as I started edging toward the door, loath to put my back toward them. "I don't want you here for this. I'll take you back to your rooms."

"But—" Koen protested, but our mother interrupted.

"He's right, Koen dear. Go with him. This isn't your burden."

My brother looked at me with a frown, and I shot him a look. "I'll return shortly," I said to my mother.

"Do not delay," the High Inquisitor answered, as my mother collapsed into the seat of the throne, resting her head against its back.

I nodded and pulled open the door, dragging Koen out of the room behind me.

"One of you, come with me," I ordered one of the Huntsman on duty, my mind turning as I quickly thought through the next few steps. "The other can stay to guard these doors. We'll be back shortly."

I kept walking as the guards looked at each other, using their distraction at my unexpected order to whisper to Koen. “Run ahead now and warn Arden. I assume you know who he is?” Koen nodded, his previous confusion at my manner dropping as he caught on to my scheme. “Get him a cloak and a change of clothes—servant’s garb if you can, so he can slip out unseen before the alarm is raised.”

“Say no more,” Koen assured me. “I’ll have him out before you get there and be back in my room before they ask questions.”

My heart pounded. If we were caught, we wouldn’t be killed for treason, but we would pay in some way, I was sure. My mother loved us, but she was in too deep with an evil she no longer recognized as such. “And Koen,” I said, before he could turn away, “tell Arden to warn Nieve—if he even knows where she is.”

He nodded, and I cleared my throat as one of the guards stepped up behind us. “Go to your chambers, Koen, and stay there. I’ll be there when I can,” I ordered him, and he nodded meekly, the picture of a younger prince following orders.

As he ran off down the hall, I stopped, turning to the guard beside me to distract him and give Koen time to get ahead. “We have what may be a difficult task ahead of us, Huntsman. I must be assured of your discretion,” I said in my most kingly voice. “I’ll explain what we must do in a moment, but first, tell me your name.” *Hurry*, I urged Koen in my mind as the Huntsman began telling me his name and assuring me of his loyalty.

Little did he realize that his most precious charges, myself and Koen, were the most disloyal people in this kingdom and had been for the last two years. Although I was the one who had first started questioning whether our persecution of mages was as heavenly ordained as the High Inquisitor always claimed, it was Koen who had discovered a network that helped mages get to safety before they were found out. We had never had an opportunity to help one until now. *Don’t let us fail on our first chance*, I pleaded with whichever god might be listening. *And let me live long enough to right the wrongs of this country.*

Chapter Fifteen

Alaric

“Well met, Alaric,” a gravelly female voice said off to my left. I looked over to find Headmistress Violet striding toward me from the direction of the Headmistress’ building. It was now summer, the air warm and filled with the sounds of crickets chirping.

“Good afternoon, Headmistress Violet,” I replied, stopping to let her catch up. “I’m just here to pick up Snow from one of her lessons.”

“Ah yes, she’s been progressing nicely, at least when she’s with me. She’s a very intelligent lady, your wife.”

A hum of pride threaded through my veins at the compliment to Nieve, accompanied by a hint of longing. I was always hungry to hear how much other people loved her, but I wished I could accept that praise as her real husband. *You are her real husband. The magical bond is true and lasting, Bernadine assured you of it. Just because she isn’t in love with you doesn’t mean it’s not real.*

“Well I won’t keep you, but I just wanted to tell you some news I’ve just received. Your brother has fully healed, and not only that, he will be attending a council here at Deerbolt in a few months.”

A shot of pure joy jolted through me, and I couldn’t suppress a grin stretching from ear to ear. “Truly?!” I asked the Headmistress, and she smiled—a rare thing for the usually taciturn Boundary Fairy.

“Yes, truly. As will Prince Luca and Princess Ella. I believe you are friends with them as well?”

“A bit,” I admitted. “Snow knows them better than I do.”

“Then you may pass along the news to her. I’m sure you’ll both be happy to have some more people around before the Academy is back in session again. Briar Rose always says it’s a bit lonely during summer break.”

I nodded, silently disagreeing but too happy at the news to care very much.

“Well, I must be going. I’m glad I caught you before I had to dash off. Give my regards to your wife.”

She strode off again, headed toward the dining hall, which still served meals even though most of the school population was away. I turned in the direction of the stables, slowing as I walked through the archway. Although there was no real reason to do so, I kept my approach silent, years of training as a Huntsman making it difficult to act any other way, even in one of the safest places in the continent.

I could hear Nieve laughing at something Briar Rose said, followed by Headmistress Lilac’s voice chiding them. Peering down the long hall between stalls, I caught sight of them grouped around a door at the end along with Prince Raleigh, who was shaking his head at the two girls.

“But Auntie Lilac, he *is* a silly thing really,” Briar protested.

“Says you,” the Headmistress responded patiently, “but I’m sure *he* doesn’t feel the same way. Or if he did, he probably wouldn’t want everyone else to think he’s silly. That’s the cardinal rule when dealing with creatures, you must show a respect for them on a fundamental level or they won’t respect you.”

“Well, we could just have Snow *ask* him if he thinks he’s a silly boy, or if he minds that we think so.”

“I couldn’t!” Snow protested, laughing again. “I’m just hoping that he doesn’t understand what we’re saying. Some of them can, you know!”

“Well, he *is* silly. Most donkeys are.. And if he doesn’t know it, he should,” Briar insisted, drawing a gust of laughter from Raleigh.

As Snow looked over at him, she caught sight of me and drew in a breath. “We’re done for the day, right Headmistress Lilac?”

After saying goodbye to her friends, she hurried down the hall toward me. I waved at the others and then turned to walk out of the stables with her.

“Briar was picking on poor Thistle. I just hope he couldn’t understand her,” she said, shaking her head even though she couldn’t help but smile. “I don’t think he’d really mind. I have talked to him once before and he seems a very practical sort. But no one likes to think they’re silly, don’t you agree?”

I shrugged. "Some people *are* silly. You shouldn't be afraid to face the truth of yourself."

Gravel crunched under our feet as we passed out of the empty courtyard, winding our way between buildings until we reached the cart path leading to our cottage.

"I think everyone is a little silly in different ways, or at least there are parts of each of us that would appear silly to someone else. I confess that I'd rather not know what parts of me others thought were silly. I'm a bit of a coward that way, I suppose."

"You are neither silly nor a coward," I corrected her promptly, wondering how she could think either of those things about herself.

"You didn't hear me sighing over the details of Ella's wedding with Briar earlier today," she said in a teasing tone. "I'm *sure* you would have thought me silly then."

"Not at all. You expected to have a beautiful state wedding just like she did and sacrificed that expectation for your own safety. It's only natural that you would want to live vicariously through Princess Ella."

I glanced over to see the smile fade from her face. My own peace left with her smile. *Idiot. Why give voice to all that she's lost?*

"And that proves the other thing I said," she sighed. "I have a streak of cowardice within me that I didn't see before. Our wedding is proof of that. And I can't help thinking... the safer I feel here, the guiltier I feel. What about Snowdonia? And the Republic? I ran from the problems in both without even trying to fix anything. I'm a princess in one, and as a mage, I'm an equal in the other, but instead I ran to Spindle where no one expects anything from me and where I can hide behind you!"

A note of anguish entered her usual quietly cheerful tone, making me stop in my tracks. I reached out, catching her hand and turning her around. She didn't look up, but waited patiently in front of me.

"You are *not* a coward. What could you have done in either situation except what we did? You chose life over death or worse, and you didn't have the tools to fight back."

Her head was still bowed, so I took her other hand in mine, desperate to get her to see things my way. "Yes, you're a princess, but it's not as if you were in line for the throne. And you were raised far away from court. No one ever expected you to solve any of Snowdonia's problems. That will be

your brother's job. You should have been shielded in the Republic, instead you were threatened once more. The best option you had was to remove yourself from that situation before someone made things worse. Those aren't the actions of a coward. They're intelligent decisions made by an intelligent person. You don't have to feel guilty for surviving."

She finally looked up with a pained smile on her face. "That's very kind of you to say, Alaric," she hesitated, as if she was going to say more, then squeezed my hands and dropped them, turning to walk down the path toward our cottage once more.

I followed, wrestling the entire way back against the growing desire to confess my heart to her and ask if she might ever feel the same for me. But the pain of her rejection before—when what I felt for her was paltry in comparison to what I felt now—held me back. *Who's the real coward here?*

"I want to head up to Deerbolt as soon as we can!" I called to Nieve as I turned the corner from the stairs and started heading toward the kitchen. "I know the Headmistresses said they probably won't get here until the afternoon, but I just want to make sure I'm on hand when he arrives."

"I don't think that will be a problem," Nieve said, standing by the back door to the kitchen, another person entering just behind her.

I tensed, trying to figure out what kitchen utensil within reach would make the best weapon, before realizing the stranger wasn't a threat. He wasn't even a stranger.

"Ritter!" I cried hoarsely, a wave of emotion sweeping over me.

I felt ten years old again, overwhelmed at my older brother's return from training in the army. Only instead of a youth just coming into his strength, the brother that stood before me was all sinew and lean muscle. He had the look of a man that knew what lengths he would go to, and his eyes were hardened, a cautious note mingling in the obvious happiness he felt at seeing me.

In three wide steps, I had crossed the room and pulled him into a bone-breaking hug. He felt even thinner than he looked, and my heart broke a little at the reality of the man in my embrace contrasted against the memory of the twenty-three-year-old I had left here ten years ago.

“Are you well?” I asked, my voice gruff as I pulled away. His presence was overwhelming, a part of myself finally felt right. Although he was older, and experienced, and had a skill in his magic that I couldn’t compete with, I hadn’t realized that there was a part of me that was just constantly worried for him. Now that he was here I didn’t know if I wanted to cry or laugh.

“Well enough, and endlessly better than I was a few months ago,” he replied, a sardonic note in his voice.

“What happened to you?” I asked, curious for details but bracing myself for the probability that he wouldn’t want to talk about whatever had held him behind enemy lines in the Wasteland.

“Before I get into that, can you tell me what Princess Nieve is doing in your kitchen?” he asked quietly, nodding to Nieve, who hovered in the background.

She stood wringing her hands with an anxiously solicitous look on her face. *She wants to help but doesn’t know how.* My heart warmed at her goodness.

Walking over to her side, I smiled at her, holding my hand out. She gave me a bemused look and took it. I turned back to Ritter. “There’s no real way to prepare you for this, so I’ll just say it. We’re married, brother. Nieve is my wife.”

Ritter stood stock still, staring at me for a full minute. His eyes flicked to Nieve and then back to me.

“The Headmistress who told me how to find your cottage mentioned that you had a wife, but she called her...” he blinked. “Snow White,” he finished with a quiet laugh. “Her code name in the guards. So this is a cover?” He put his hands up. “Never mind. Don’t tell me. The less I know, the better. My allegiance lies with Spindle now, so I would have to report any covert operations happening in our territory.”

A prickle of anger snaked up my back at his disbelief that Nieve could be my wife. *It makes sense though. I never told him about her rejection, but no one would believe a princess would marry someone like me of her own free*

will. And she didn't. She married me because it was best out of a handful of bad options.

"No cover. No covert operations," I replied, keeping my voice even. "We're well and truly married, by the ancient rites in the Dwarven Republic, actually. We're here because she's a mage. Spindle is safest for her. And leaving all that princess stuff behind is what's keeping her safe, so please don't say anything."

"I'm known as Snow here, and that's who I want to be," Nieve said to Ritter, her hand tightening on mine.

I glanced at her, reading discomfort in her rigid posture. *She's still blaming herself for not doing better for Snowdonia and the Republic.* I squeezed her hand and she glanced at me, some of the anxiety leaving her posture from whatever she could read in my eyes.

"Well, congratulations are in order then," Ritter said, looking between the two of us.

"Thank you," Nieve said softly, a blush passing over her fair skin as she dropped my hand and turned toward the range. "Can I make you two some tea while you catch up?"

"It's too hot for tea," Ritter said with a crooked smile, "but thank you."

"A wise choice. I think I've learned to make tea well enough by now, but having grown up like I did, I feel like I've had to learn even the most basic tasks all at once and do none of them well yet. You can ask your poor brother."

I smiled at her, shaking my head. "I'd rather have whatever you care to provide than food or drink from the best cooks in the land."

Her cheeks went apple red at the compliment, and she couldn't keep a smile from her face. I treasured the sight. *It was me that put that smile there, no one else.*

"Well, a princess and a pauper you may be, but you're as annoying as any other couple in love."

I struggled to keep my own smile from falling, hating how close to the nerve he had hit. *Our marriage may be real, but being in love takes two. As much as she clearly cares about my well being, I can't pretend she's in love with me.*

"Enough of all that," I said. "Let's hear about you. Where have you been? And what are your plans?"

“Ugh, you’ll hear enough about that at the council tomorrow. I want to talk about you. What news of home?”

We spent the next few hours catching up, each of us holding back a fair amount when it came to our jobs, but otherwise, we couldn’t stop talking. Nieve bustled around quietly in the background cooking and going in and out to attend to other chores every now and again. Sometimes she chipped in when we were talking about our childhood, for although Ritter hadn’t really played with her, we had all grown up in the same area and knew all the same people, and she had more recent news of our village than I did.

It was getting on toward dinner by the time Ritter left. Nieve pressed him to stay in the spare bedroom we had, but he refused, saying he already had a room at the Academy, and was expected at a meeting tonight.

As we waved him off, I felt only excitement for the council tomorrow. Whatever was so important as to bring dignitaries from most of the countries on the continent together paled in comparison to the fact that it had brought my brother back to me.

Chapter Sixteen

Nieve

“Stay up you cursed thing,” I whispered to the hem of my dress, trying to think of a spell I had learned in the last few months that might make it stay. Another example of learning all the wrong things. I wasn’t bad with a needle, but this was the first dress that I had ever made. Part of the hem was coming undone, so my black linen skirt kept dragging on the floor.

“It’s a simple design,” I muttered to myself, “and of all the spells I’ve learned, you’d think there would be one that could fix a dress emergency. But no. All I’ve learned how to do is talk to overactive squirrels and clean things in a hurry.”

The cleaning spells have actually been really useful, I admitted grudgingly, leaning against the wall as a support while I looked at my hemline. Sure enough, at least four inches of it was gaping open, my stitching having been ripped out somehow.

“Hopefully it lasts the day and isn’t too noticeable.”

“What isn’t noticeable?” Alaric’s quiet voice inquired.

I snapped my head up and put my hand on my chest to steady my nerves at his sudden appearance. “You shouldn’t sneak up on me!” I laughed. “But it’s only my hem. Making a presentable dress is harder than I thought.” I did a little twirl. “Do you think anyone will notice?”

His eyes traveled from my toes back up to my face. My stomach tied itself in knots to have his attention fixed on me, and I regretted asking him. *Please let him notice anything **except** how I feel!*

“While I think you would have looked just as beautiful in one of your work dresses, I have to admit, you look stunning. So yes, I think people will notice you.” His gaze was earnest and I felt my mouth dry up at the compliment.

“That’s not what I meant...” I started picking at the edge of my wine-colored corset as my mind raced for a response, but none came.

“Nie-Snow, I know we’re about to go into some very serious meetings, but I wanted to talk to you about something important—” We both turned as the door to the lecture hall that was being used for the council swung open, and Briar’s head popped out.

“Oh it’s you two! You’re early. Come on in. We just finished setting up.” She motioned for us to come inside as she secured the door so that it stayed open.

I looked over at Alaric, wanting to protest that we should talk *now* if he has something important to say, but he just smiled and shrugged, offering his arm.

It’s probably nothing, I told myself as I took his arm. He will want to talk about what vegetables we plant for next year. Or something to do with the stall for the next fair. Don’t get your hopes up. What made that difficult was that I couldn’t deny that he had been paying me more attention lately. *But that doesn’t mean he’s in love with you. You live together, there’s no one else for him to pay attention to.*

We took our seats at the back of the room next to Briar Rose. She told us a steady stream of information in a low voice, pointing out each delegate as they entered, and explaining all the little hiccups that had been smoothed over whenever there was a gathering like this. I remembered exactly the sort of thing at Machturn Castle.

“Apparently, Luca and Ella have some important news to share, although the fiends wouldn’t even drop a hint of it last night. I was so annoyed with them, but they insisted. They said it had to wait until—oh!” Briar broke off, clutching my arm in excitement. “Look over there! No—there. See that woman?” she asked, and I prayed to the Creator that the stern-looking woman in military garb couldn’t hear Briar’s hoarse stage whisper. “That’s Lady Hood! *The Red Rider!* Can you believe it?! I hope I get a chance to speak to her.”

“Who is The Red Rider?” I asked back in a whisper.

Briar turned to me, her jaw slightly agape. “I keep forgetting you’re from Snowdonia. The Red Rider is only the most famous warrior on this side of the continent. She turned the tide of the civil war in Sherwood when she

was younger than me! She's led more missions into the Wasteland than anyone else. She's the one who called this council together."

I watched the woman cross the room, shaking hands with the Headmistresses and then finding her seat in silence. She *looked* like a famous warrior, with a muscular build and scars and tattoos snaking across her face. Her hair was inky black, like mine, but her eyes were a piercing gray, whereas mine were almost as dark as my hair. She had pale skin too—not quite as pale as mine, but close, and looked to be about my age.

Actually, we look like we could be different versions of each other. She—the tall, brave warrior, me—the small, cowardly princess. A ghostly feeling of shame crept up on me. *She led a revolution. You didn't even try to help the mages in your country.* The truth in those accusations gnawed at me, even as my nanny's voice floated across my mind, reminding me not to compare myself to others.

I'm just one person. Besides, like Alaric said, Snowdonia was always destined to be Barrett's problem. *But you could have shown him what's really going on, if you had been paying attention yourself. You still could! You could be another voice, showing him that he needn't fear mages. Showing his mother for who she truly is.* My heart broke a little at the pain that such a revelation would cause him. How could I be the one to hurt him like that?

But if you don't now, the hurt will only grow. Eventually, it will catch up to him. In her fear, Katharina will show her true colors, and by then, it may be too late for Barrett.

I looked back across the room at Lady Red. She probably wouldn't shy away from inflicting pain on someone if she knew it was the right thing to do. She certainly wouldn't run away from someone like Clan Leader Brenner. The image of her marching right into his headquarters with her sword drawn popped into my head.

That would be two revolutions that she won, I suppose. I tried to picture myself doing the same thing and shook my head. Besides the fact that Lady Red looked to be as tall as Alaric and as muscular too, she had a sort of deadly presence that I couldn't even pretend to muster. She looked like a hunting wolf. I felt like a little sparrow whose best defense was to fly off with the other sparrows at the first sign of a predator.

As my thoughts continued to swirl in my mind, the others in the room eventually settled down and the meeting soon started in earnest. It took most of the day. Throughout the morning, almost all of the delegates had a chance to speak, introducing themselves and providing me a little flavor of each country, but the really interesting parts came after lunch.

Ritter presented a concise but riveting recounting of his days in capture and torture in the Wasteland. I couldn't help the tears that streamed down my eyes as he spoke, and I clutched at Alaric's hand as he sat tensed next to me.

As heartbreaking as it was to hear of the treatment he had received at the hands of the Beasts in the Wasteland, it wasn't surprising. We all knew what they were capable of, which is why we all fought against them, at least the countries that spanned the border with the Wasteland did. What surprised everyone, however, was what Ritter reported at the end of his account.

"The Beasts are not the unintelligent, bloodthirsty creatures we've all thought—or at least that's not all they are. During my time there, I overheard my captors speaking to each other. And what's more, speaking about their Queen and the plans she had."

A gasp flew around the room. Alaric, already rigid in the seat next to me, had a sort of deadly focus settle around him, which I remembered from a few tight spots on our travels to the Republic and Spindle.

"Yes," Ritter continued. "They couldn't speak exactly like you or I. In fact, there were only a handful that seemed to have that capability. But some could make themselves understood, even to me. And they worship their leader—to the point of madness. They planned a coordinated attack against Sherwood, just before I broke free. The only reason it failed was because The Red Rider and her Shadow," he nodded to Lady Red and the tattooed man seated next to her, "rescued me and got us back in time to warn the border patrol."

We had hardly recovered from his information when Luca stood to give his report. After detailing their visit to the border country of Sherwood, Ella stood with him and spoke.

"Somehow, a Beast slipped across the border and charged at us savagely. Thankfully a unit of guards was able to stop the thing, but my magic latched onto the creature before I could control it. By the time Luca and the others were able to call me back to myself, it was done. The Beast had been

reduced to a corpse—but not the corpse of a Beast. It was a man. A broken, shattered mess of man, but it was definitely human.”

She looked pale at the end of her account, as if the memory of it drained her, and sat down with strained dignity as Luca answered questions from the other delegates.

I would hate to have such a memory in my head. And if magic is a connection, then who knows how her magic connected her to that monster and what lingers from the experience. I shuddered. No doubt she would have nightmares of it for years.

Lady Red stood, and the entire room fell into quick silence. “With this new information, we in Sherwood, as well as our allies in Asileboix, believe that the threat of the Wasteland has reached a tipping point. We believe that this Queen of theirs is looking to expand her territory. If we don’t band together and stop it now, we may lose. Forever.”

She looked to each of the delegates in turn, her stare challenging. “Asileboix has entered into agreement with us. Spindle has offered support too. We ask now for pledges from Pelerin and Charmagne, and we want to discuss strategies for pursuing Snowdonia and Haven into alliance with us.”

The room was tense. *Is the threat really so bad? How can so many countries, who have been at odds for so long, band together?*

Prince Luca stood again. “I have been authorized by my father, King Cirro of Charmagne, to pledge our participation in the Treaty of Istoire.” He produced a scroll and handed it to Lady Red, who gave him a short bow.

The delegate from Pelerine stood up quickly, and with a flowery speech that lasted much too long and made Lady Red stir restlessly in her seat, provoking an indulgent smile from the man next to her, he pledged Pelerin’s participation as well.

My eyes shot up in surprise. Although I hadn’t been trained in statecraft, I knew that Pelerin and Charmagne were very uneasy allies and were, until recently, both staunch allies of Snowdonia against the mage countries. Even within the last few years, a treaty had been renewed between Charmagne and Snowdonia ensuring that any escaping mages into Charmagne be sent back to Machturm for trial. *How will that treaty be upheld now?* A flicker of hope sparked in my heart for the refugees from Snowdonia.

Lady Red motioned a nondescript sort of man up to the front next. As soon as he began speaking, I could tell he was from Snowdonia, although I

didn't recognize him. I shrunk in my seat, hoping he wouldn't see me. Soon, I forgot all about that as I listened in increasing horror and anguish to his report.

"In the last few months, the treatment of the mages in Snowdonia has gotten increasingly worse. Now the current policy is to search for them village by village, and when any are found, or even non-mages who have merely been accused of witchcraft are caught, they are being forced to serve at the front lines at the Wasteland. With no training, our sources say they are quickly destroyed—even the few that show some aptitude with their magic. Our agent network recently faced a disruption, but the order is reliably verified as having come from the Queen herself."

Guilt stabbed through me again. *My own people are being used as cannon fodder, not even given due process under the law, and I sit here listening to others shouldering the burdens in their countries?* People's voices started to blur together as I worked to contain my emotions. The walls felt like they were closing in, and the weight of judgment on me made it hard to breathe.

Suddenly, I felt Alaric's hand on my shoulder. "Are you alright?" he asked, his quiet voice full of concern. The room around us was buzzing as people milled about. The meeting was over for the day.

I managed to pull my lips into a smile. "I'm alright. I just have a headache. And I'm tired." I dropped my voice, wanting to share my burden with him. "Actually I—" I broke off as his brother appeared over his shoulder.

"Alaric, there's someone I want you to meet," he said.

Oh please don't let it be the Snowdonian spy that gave his report. If he recognizes me...

The claustrophobic feeling that had been growing became too much. I tugged at Alaric's sleeve. He turned back to me, his eyes full of concern.

"I'm a little overwhelmed. I want to go home now and just have some quiet."

"Alright, let's go," he said, starting to turn back to his brother.

"No," I interrupted, tugging on his sleeve again. "I meant just me. You stay here."

He opened his mouth to protest but I forestalled him. "We've never had a hint of danger here. And with the council going on, it's safer still. Besides,"

I fumbled in my pocket, pulling up a handful of charms and finding the one I wanted. “I still have the hiding charm, see? I’ll use it on the way home, and you know as well as I that the cottage is warded against every possible attack.”

He hesitated, and I grabbed his hand. “Please stay. Be with your brother. I just need some time alone.”

He nodded reluctantly and I squeezed his hand before letting go. Giving a little wave to Ritter, I made my way out the door, Briar Rose having been successfully distracted by Prince Raleigh and everyone else caught up in discussing the explosive news we had heard. Within a few minutes I was out in the warm summer afternoon and headed home. But even the golden sunlight filtering through the trees wasn’t quite strong enough to banish my guilt.

As soon as I left Deerbolt’s grounds, I slowed down a little, rolling the hiding charm in my hand as I walked. The situation in Snowdonia had become unimaginable so quickly.

“It was terrible to begin with,” I told myself sternly. “I was simply shielded from the consequences for a long time.”

For generations, Snowdonia had been harsh on its magic users. They often faced death sentences or life imprisonment. But they would always get a trial, and it was only after my father died that the death sentences became more common.

Why would my stepmother increase mage penalties for others while trying to find a way to cure me of my magic at the same time? I was too drained to try and understand that logic, or the complexity of her feelings and intentions toward me. It was easier to think of her as she was now—fully given over to evil. It was harder to consider that she may have arrived there on a road paved with good intentions.

And what is Barrett doing? Is he a part of this new decree? I couldn’t imagine my serious and thoughtful younger brother ordering such a thing, but I hadn’t seen him much in the last couple of years. Maybe he had changed like his mother did the closer he got to ruling in his own right.

I should have done something before now. If Katharina was going to order my death, it should have been because I was protecting the innocent in our country. The guilt that had been steadily growing on me since we had made it to safety settled into my bones.

In the meeting I had just left, there had been representatives from all of the countries on the continent, save Snowdonia and Haven. Each of them had been doing difficult work to make their countries better, to fight against the threat of the Wasteland, and to begin treating mages with the humanity they deserved.

Ella and Luca had effected such a sudden change in Charmagne, it was breathtaking. Since one of Pelerin's noblewomen had married into the Asilean royal family, the Pelerines had been dismissing anti-magic laws slowly but steadily. Sherwood had been leading the fight against the Wasteland for generations. Spindle was the most prosperous country on the continent, a known bastion for mages. I knew nothing of Haven and its territories, but my beloved Snowdonia seemed to have set itself against the work the rest of the continent was doing.

If Barrett is either complicit or not yet powerful enough to wrest control of the throne from his mother, who will aid Snowdonia? Sorrow weighed on my limbs, making me feel aimless and numb.

Abruptly, two small shapes darted past my face. On instinct, my head snapped back, narrowly avoiding a collision. My heart jumped to my throat at the sudden attack and I put my hands up, protecting my face as I tried to see what had almost hit me.

With a twittering chatter, another shape swept past me, wheeling a circle around my head before peeling off.

"You again!" I shrieked, putting my hand on my chest and laughing in relief as two more birds danced in the air around my head.

There was no attack, just the kindly meant interference of my songbird friends. A vibrant blue one fluttered up, making me flinch, but it settled on my shoulder with a happy chirp, its tiny claws digging into the straps of my corset and short-sleeved undershirt. I looked at it out of the corner of my eye, and it cocked its head, as if asking what was wrong.

"You all have gotten quite good at reading my moods," I said to them with a laugh.

As I had worked on my magical aptitude, they had seemed to work on reading humans. It wasn't the first time they had intervened when I was feeling low. As I continued walking to the cottage they flew with me, trilling birdsong as they swept around the path in little dips and swoops. No matter how dire the situation in our lands seemed to be, I couldn't stay sad

with these cheerful companions. I joined in with their song, whistling an accompaniment as best I could and laughing when I guessed the direction of their music wrong.

By the time I walked through the overgrown gate to the back garden of our cottage, I was feeling much more cheerful. The beebalm buzzed loudly as I passed the sunny patch where it grew. The timbre of their buzzing was angrier than the usual industrious hum I had come to expect from this part of the garden, so I paused, watching the honey bees and bumbles at their work.

“What’s upset you, I wonder?” I wondered aloud. I considered taking off my suppression charm for a moment. *I could connect with them properly in case there was something wrong with their hive, although what I would do about it, I have no idea.*

The bird on my shoulder took off with a low swoop, narrowly missing one bumble bee that was heading home for the evening.

I tsked at the bluebird. “No wonder you’re feeling upset,” I said to the buzzing flowers. “These birds are enough to drive someone batty!” I laughed and continued on the path, waving off the next swooping songbird and scooting through the back door before they could follow me inside. Shaking my head, I walked through the kitchen to the sitting room, intent on finding my sewing box so I could fix the hem of my skirt. *At least that’s one problem I can solve today.*

My feet slowed as I caught sight of a beautiful dress laid across the cushioned window seat on one side of the room. Late afternoon sunlight filtered through the open mullioned window, casting a warm glow on the beautiful creamy yellow cotton dress. A sapphire blue bodice had been laid over top of it, a rich jewel tone with ruby red stitching along the collar.

Tears sprang to my eyes. It was a stunning dress, one that I would have worn any day of the week at home in Asylbrunn. Now it seemed too beautiful to believe.

This is what Alaric was trying to tell me at Deerbold, I realized with a blush. But why didn’t he tell me about it before the council? Maybe it’s for the banquet tonight. How did he afford it? My heart fluttered at what the gift might mean. Maybe I wasn’t reading his extra attention wrong! Maybe he does feel the same as I do!

A thrill fizzled through my veins at the thought. I felt light, as if my feet would leave the floor and I would start flying around with my songbird friends any minute. I could hear them now, chattering away outside the window and gliding past in arcing swoops.

I chewed my lip. I doubted Alaric would let me alone at the cottage for too long, especially since he knew I would see the dress when I got here.

“I’ll put it on now and surprise him,” I told myself, and started working on the ties to the much darker dress I was wearing, pausing to pull the window closed to keep out the slight chill of the oncoming evening. I had been so proud of my dress earlier in the day. But now, the black skirt and dark red corset seemed too somber in comparison to the beautiful dress Alaric had gotten me.

With quick motions, I changed into the new one, relishing the softness of the yellow underdress as I slid it over my head. I twirled, wishing I had a mirror, then started pulling on the gorgeous bodice. The ties were in the back, so it took me much longer than usual to tighten the top laces, then painstakingly pull the tension down through the length of the bodice until it was mostly closed. Finally, after giving my arms a quick break, I reached around at my waist, taking the ribbons that hung down from the bottom, and pulling them tight with a swift tug.

The second I did so, the bodice seemed to snap closed like a vise, pushing the air out of my lungs.

My hands scrabbled at the laces, trying to loosen the bottom ones with increasing urgency. A tingling spread throughout my chest, pins and needles prickling my skin as I desperately tried to breathe. I started to pull my hands back around front to see if I could tug open the neck of the bodice enough to get a breath, but my hands had somehow gotten tangled in the ties at the back, and I couldn’t get them free.

Panicking, I struggled harder, but the ribbons seemed to grip my wrists harder the more I struggled, and the bodice squeezed tighter and tighter.

I began to truly panic, my lungs screaming for air, trying to take even enough breath to call out to the birds still swooping outside the now closed window, but no noise escaped my lips.

I sank to my knees, shadow closing in on the edges of my vision, then fell to the floor as I tried once more to free my hands. *If I can take off my*

suppression charm, I could use my magic, I thought fuzzily, my thoughts scattering as my lungs screamed.

Then the shadow claimed me, and I stopped fighting.

Chapter Seventeen

Alaric

“So that was The Red Rider?” I asked Ritter, somewhat overawed.

“Yes, the one who turned the tide for Sherwood. I worked with her in the field several times, and she’s as talented as the stories claim.”

I could imagine. She wore strength like armor. Every step she took was like a dare to others in the room to test her. When Ritter had introduced me to her just now, all the confidence I had gained through years of service and spying and smuggling seemed inconsequential to the quiet confidence she exuded. If we were picking sides now, I wanted me and Nieve firmly in The Red Rider’s camp.

My thoughts drifted to Nieve. She was tough too, but in a different way. She didn’t have the first idea how to physically fight, nor would she have the stomach for it, but she fought with her heart. She extended kindness to every being she met, whether human or animal, connecting with them exactly where they were and seeing hope in even the darkest situations. To be her friend was to be understood. To be near her was to be at rest.

Even now, I craved to be close to her. She hadn’t been gone long, but I was tired of being around strangers, of sitting still all day and listening to bad news that had turned to worse.

And I hate the thought of her walking alone, even if it’s safe. Besides, I want to talk to her about our future. My throat went dry. I still didn’t know if I had the courage to even hint at my true feelings, but we at least needed to come up with a plan for what we were doing. *I think she’s been opening up to me, but I don’t want to overwhelm her and make her shy away again.*

Unease prickled in my chest, the feeling lodged under the center of my ribcage. Now that I wasn’t required to be a steel trap of secrets for my

work, I had begun viewing secrets as the enemy, at least in regards to Nieve. *You told yourself you would talk to her about your feelings today.*

The desire to check on Nieve became almost uncomfortable, almost a physical tug on my heart. *And I guess I can't pretend I'm not lovestruck.*

“Oh, I wanted you to meet the agent from Snowdonia. He’s actually stationed in Pelerin now, at the border of Snowdonia. I met him yesterday and—”

I put my hands up to stop Ritter. “I’ll meet him at the banquet tonight. I need to get home.”

Ritter rolled his eyes. “Seriously? I know you’re newly married but there are so many important people here. You could make connections that could transform your career! You don’t want to be stuck in a backwater woods for the rest of your life do you?” He lowered his voice even further. “*I know your wife would appreciate a higher status of living too. Why don’t you stay a little and make some new contacts?*”

I was struck by his words. *Would Nieve like a nicer house?* We were certainly living in a house that was rustic compared to what she was used to, but we didn’t want for anything, and it enabled us to keep her identity secret. I shook my head. *I’ll have to ask. She’s so content no matter her circumstances that maybe she is longing for more and doesn’t want to bring it up. All the more reason we need to talk.* The anxiety in my chest tightened.

“Not right now, Ritter, I need to go home. We’ll be back at the banquet.”

I gave him a brief hug, and he shook his head at me. “This is why I’ll never fall in love. It takes all the fun out of life.”

I slipped out of the Academy as silently as I could, jogging as I hit the cart path to our cottage. My chest felt tight, making it hard to breathe. *Maybe I do need to take a step back from Nieve if I can’t go twenty minutes without seeing her and my breathing stops if she’s out of sight.* Of course, according to the bards, that was the typical symptom of love. It sounded more like asthma to me.

The backyard came into view, and I jumped over the fence lightly, not bothering with the gate. I slowed to a walk on the short path from the gate to the house, trying to calm my heartbeat. It shot up again as several of Nieve’s gang of birds rocketed around the house, swooping at me angrily with shrill screeches.

“Alright, alright!” I said, trying not to swat at the irritating things as I held my hands up to protect my head. For my efforts, one landed on my wrist and started pecking at my head.

“Ow!” I shook my arm, knocking it off. “Hey, I could use a little help with these birds!” I called out to Nieve, jogging the last few steps to the backdoor and just barely making it inside without one of the infuriating creatures following me in.

The kitchen was silent except for my panting breath and the tinkle of the waterfall spigot in the sink.

“Nieve?” I repeated, as I bent down to take off my boots.

When she didn’t respond I straightened back up, the anxiety in my chest almost painful now. In a few steps I was in the sitting area and my eyes lit upon a sight I feared more than any other.

Nieve lay completely still on the floor in a pool of yellow fabric, hunched and facing away from me, her hands tangled behind her back in the ribbons of her bodice.

“No!” I leaped across the room, falling to my knees and stooping over to look into her face.

Her normally pale face was a mottled reddish blue, her eyes closed. I couldn’t see any rise and fall of her chest, and I noticed that her bodice was cutting into her skin.

“Mage’s blood!” I cursed, pulling at the top of the cursed garment to see if I could make some room.

The smooth fabric proved deceptively strong, however, and I couldn’t even get a finger underneath it. Turning to the back, I looked at her hands, tangled in the laces, and cursed. *It will take too long to figure out how to untangle that mess.*

Pulling out a knife I kept strapped to my boot at all times, I breathed a quick prayer and put the sharp tip under the bottom of the column of laces. With a quick, controlled slash, I cut the bodice in two, severing the knot around her hands in another motion and sheathing my knife.

The laces wriggled and writhed as they dropped to the floor, moving as if by their own accord for just a moment too long, before lying still. The sapphire blue bodice slumped to the floor as well, and Nieve drew in a huge choking breath the moment it left her skin.

“You’re okay, you’re okay!” I said bracingly, sitting down heavily beside her and pulling her into my lap.

She clung to me, drawing in several deep breaths before pushing back a little and staring up at me with frightened eyes.

“It’s okay. You’re all right now,” I said soothingly, rubbing her back with slow strokes, the contact as much a reassurance for me as I was hoping it was for her. I pushed one corner of my mouth up into a half smile. “I told you what you had on earlier looked beautiful. There’s no need to risk death for a pretty dress,” I teased, trying to cover my unsettled nerves.

“No need to—then why did you give it to me?! Whatever magic was in it nearly killed me!” she accused, a frown marring her forehead.

I wrinkled my own in response. “I didn’t give you that dress. I’ve never seen it before in my life.”

She went still, then shot out of my lap and began pulling off the new yellow gown she was still wearing. Confused, and a little embarrassed, I stood up, helping pull the garment over her head since she obviously wanted it off. Once she was free of it, she snatched it from my hands and threw it on the floor, staring at it as if it were a snake.

“I should have known,” she moaned, standing there in her white underdress and wringing her hands. “I let myself believe just for one minute that you—I mean I should have known. We can’t afford something like that! But you said you wanted to talk, and I thought that maybe you felt something too!” She broke off staring at me in anguish and a little fear.

The problem of the dress was not at all diminished in my mind, but a burgeoning understanding was capturing my interest a little more at the moment. “You thought I bought you that dress because I have feelings for you?”

She nodded miserably, tears starting to slide down her face. “I know. It’s pathetic.”

I reached out, wiping her tears away with my knuckle and staring at her in heart-stopping wonder. “It’s *not* pathetic. Not even a little bit. And we are going to discuss how very not pathetic it is as soon as we figure out what happened here.”

Her mouth dropped open, but instead of replying she just nodded, drawing in another fortifying breath which was music to my ears, then wiped at her eyes to dry the rest of her tears.

“You said the dress had magic?” I asked, pushing the highly interesting question of her possible feelings toward me out of my mind and focusing on the danger at hand.

“Yes. As soon as I laced up the bodice, it closed like a vise.” She shuddered at the memory. “When I tried to loosen it, the ties snared my hands so I couldn’t take off my suppression charm and try to fight the spell.” Her hand snaked up to her throat, clutching at the rune-marked jasper stone hanging there. “Not that I would have known what to do,” she said in a broken voice. “I’ve only just started learning magic. I don’t have enough power to work against something so—“

“You will,” I interrupted, trying to prevent her from telling herself she was weak. “You’ll keep learning until you can. For now, we’ll figure it out together. But Nieve, who gave you the dress?”

She shook her head. “I don’t know. It was laid out on the window seat when I came back. You came out behind me when we went up to the council this morning, so I thought you had laid it out before we left.”

A fiery blush lit up her cheeks, sending my heart hammering again at what it meant.

I shook my head. “It wasn’t me. And whoever did it was able to get past the wards the Headmistresses have put around the cottage over the years.”

The color drained from her face. I took her hand, holding it gently. “Nieve, we have to tell the Headmistresses. Not just what happened, but who you are. Someone has obviously found us. We need help.”

Her lips trembled for a moment as if she was going to cry, but instead she curved them into a bittersweet smile.

“I suppose living here as Snow and Alaric was always just a dream, wasn’t it? Duty follows us wherever we go.” She stood up a little straighter. “You’re right. Let’s tell them everything. Whoever is trying to kill me now can’t be allowed to escape. Who knows who they will hurt besides me?”

I squeezed her hand, the desire to pull her into my arms and pretend it was just us in the world almost overwhelming. Instead, I stepped back and turned to pick up the over-skirt and corset she had been wearing earlier today from where they were draped over a chair. I handed them to her wordlessly, then turned away, grabbing a nearby basket and dumping the folded blankets inside of it out onto the window seat and laying it on its side near the dress.

Although the dress and bodice hadn't done anything to us after I had cut the ties, I wasn't taking any chances. Holding the basket steady, I kicked first the bodice, then the yellow dress into the basket.

"I'm ready," Nieve said quietly, now dressed in her homemade gown again. I flipped the basket upright and held it slightly away from my body by the handles.

The walk back to Deerbolt was far from quiet. The chattering birds were back, diving and chirping angrily at me and swirling around Nieve's head anxiously. I ignored them and Nieve murmured to them in a distracted way, holding on to my arm as we walked.

When we reached Deerbolt, the birds calmed down a little but didn't fly off. As we passed the building that had held the council, Briar Rose walked out of the doors laughing with Raleigh who trailed in her wake. She broke off as she caught sight of us.

"What in the world—"

I interrupted, not bothering to be polite. "Go and get the Headmistresses. Tell them we will be waiting in Headmistress Gladiolus' office. There is nothing in this *world* more important than the conversation we need to have with them right now. Do you understand?"

Briar Rose swallowed heavily, her eyes darting to Nieve and then back to me. She nodded, turning and pushing Raleigh back into the building and letting the doors swing shut behind them. We continued on to the Headmistress' building, and finding it unlocked, walked in through the lobby.

The door to Headmistress Gladiolus' office was locked, but we didn't have long to wait. She, along with Violet and Lilac, trailed in, followed by Ritter and a stubborn-looking Briar Rose.

Headmistress Gladiolus flared her nostrils at the sight of us but said nothing. Instead, she swept passed, unlocked her office door, and ushered us all inside. The time had come to reveal ourselves.

Chapter Eighteen

Nieve

Conversation flowed around me, punctuated by stops and starts, and a few gasps from Headmistress Lilac. I sat on the edge of a brown leather chair next to the oversized desk, while the others were grouped around us on various surfaces. Alaric stood next to me, explaining my real identity and the events behind our flight to Spindle.

The Headmistresses took charge of the basket with that cursed dress in it, gathering around it as Briar put some logs in the fireplace and then started a fire with a match and whispered spell.

Once the fire was going, Violet took the dress out of the basket and threw it into the fire. As it started to burn, the flames around it turned blue and black at the edges, sizzling with eerie sounding pops and crackles.

“It’s black magic, alright. But the casting is unlike any I’m familiar with. There’s very little structure to read. I can only venture to say that it was certainly cast outside of Spindle.”

That doesn’t exactly clear things up. We knew that whoever did this was either from Snowdonia or the Dwarven Republic.

“So anyone could have brought it with them,” Ritter said, glancing at Alaric. “There’s a mole among the delegates.”

“Let’s not jump to conclusions,” Headmistress Gladiolus said. “Everyone here has been vetted in several different ways.”

They continued talking, with Alaric becoming increasingly frustrated.

I felt tired, the adrenaline of the attack and almost dying started to wear off and make my limbs heavy. A sporadic tapping on the window next to my chair pulled at my attention, and I glanced over to see my little bluebird friend. I smiled, but he didn’t stop his tapping.

I wonder what he wants? Reaching up, I untied my suppression charm, breathing in to steady my nerves and preparing to control the onslaught of animal voices that would rush at me once I removed it.

As tired as I was, I was able to manage my magic well enough that I could hear only the birds' thoughts as they fluttered outside the window. They were fractured, more emotions than thoughts, but the bluebird seemed to have a slightly more organized mind.

I focused on him and was startled when I caught a flash of an image. *That's never happened before.* Closing my eyes, I focused inside as Lilac had taught me, seeking a connection with the bluebird rather than forcing one.

After a moment, an image filtered through, along with a feeling of wrongness, of humans messing with things they shouldn't—a foul stench that the bluebird felt rather than smelled. I sorted through the emotions, putting them to one side and focusing on the memory the bluebird was giving me.

With a gasp I opened my eyes. "I know who it was," I announced, looking over at Alaric as everyone turned to stare at my sudden interruption. My voice wobbled as I said my next words. "It was my stepmother."

"How do you know?" he asked gently.

I crooked a smile. "The birds. The bluebird gave me a picture. A memory. She was disguised as an old peasant woman. Not by magic, but with wig powder and the like. I must have left the window open because she reached through there to lay it on the seat and then left."

The others gaped at me. Normally I would have shrank from such notice, but now it didn't matter. My stepmother had found me and tried to kill me again. *Was nowhere safe? And if she'll go through such lengths to get rid of me, what will she do to anyone else who gets in her way?*

"We'll have to report it to the king and queen," Ritter said, and the Headmistresses nodded.

"They certainly won't stand for such a breach of our borders," Violet seethed, crossing her arms across her chest. "They'll authorize us to take you under our protection. We'll keep you safe."

Safe. It was all I had wanted since this nightmare started. All I had wanted my whole life—doesn't anyone? But where had it gotten me? I would have to run, yet again, and feel grateful for the protection that others

could offer me, knowing that most mages from my country could only dream of such powerful allies.

If not me, who will end the madness in Snowdonia? Brenner thought I had enough power to use me to rule. With what I know now, maybe I do have enough power to end Katharina's reign, if I can just get Barrett to see sense.

Alaric knelt on one knee in front of me. "What are you thinking, Nieve?"

I looked into his face, treasuring every line of it, —the green eyes, the stubble on his chin, the long nose that had obviously been broken a time or two. The softness in his eyes almost undid me, and I wanted to reach out and throw myself into his arms.

"I think I've known for a while what I must do," I whispered, taking a shallow breath and releasing it as the certainty of my convictions solidified. "I have to go back to Snowdonia and find a way to rid it of the evil in its heart."

Chapter Nineteen

Alaric

The air froze in my lungs at Nieve's words. Go back?! No, let's run! Run to Haven, or The Northern Wilds, or The Wasteland if we have to! Anywhere to keep her out of the Queen's clutches!

Around me, everyone started talking at once.

"You can't be expected to take on the problems of an entire country!" Violet exclaimed, and Lilac nodded.

"You haven't been raised to that sort of thing," she said, her eyes glittering with tears. "You're only just coming into your magic!"

"You and I both know she would need an army at her back, and mages too," Ritter said to me, his voice grim. "The High Inquisitor alone... I'd bet anything the magic in that dress came from him, if it was the Queen who brought it here."

Headmistress Gladiolus broke in over the others. "Before we do anything, the first step will be to contact the crown princess. She will inform the king and queen and can begin mobilizing a military response if that is what they agree to. The sooner we do that, the sooner we can begin. But these things take time."

Nieve's face was flushed as everyone's input swirled around her. She had a fixed set to her jaw that I hadn't seen before.

I know she's been feeling the weight of the wrongs in Snowdonia. This isn't a spur of the moment declaration. All I want is to keep her safe, but if that's no longer what she wants... My heart rebelled at the thought. But I was long practiced in shutting out its cry.

Surely by now the Dwarven council has dealt with Brenner. If we return there, perhaps we can convince them to march with us. Moving fast, we can strike at Machturm within a week. Gathering support from Spindle, and

Charmagne too, would be ideal, but it would take too long. *If Queen Katharina is so deranged that she risks the wrath of Spindle to assassinate Nieve, she won't give us time to organize a response.*

Our chances of success were small. Our allies would probably move too slow. And if I knew the Snowdonian people, they would fight bitterly against a foreign invasion. *But she's right. Someone needs to do something, or our attention will be divided between Snowdonia and the Beasts, and then we will all fall.*

Nieve was staring at the floor, her hands tight on the arms of her chair. It was clear to me, though maybe not to anyone else, that she was going to find a way to follow through with her decision. *And if that's what she's decided, I'll see it through with her until whatever end meets us.*

"Thank you for your council," I said, pushing off the floor and turning back to the others with a sense of purpose settling over me. "It's been a tiring day, and I need to see Princess Nieve home." I turned toward Headmistress Gladiolus. "Is the cottage safe? Do we need to renew any wards?"

She nodded. "It should be safe as long as you keep the windows and doors closed. If you do that, the wards will be complete and neither magic nor messenger on foot can get in—unless you let them."

I held my arm out to Nieve. She took it, leaning on me heavily. As we left, Violet promised to sweep the woods that night around Deerbolt to see if she could find evidence of the Queen.

I could appreciate the extra security sweep, but already knew what the outcome would be. If the queen had been able to discover Nieve was alive, find our location, and attempt another assassination without being caught, she wouldn't be caught now.

But just like our allies in the room behind us, the queen had one huge blind spot. By all rights, Nieve should be crumbling right now, but her stalwart heart was only more ready to defend the helpless. And I would defend her while she did it.

Chapter Twenty

Nieve

“We have to do something,” I told Alaric as we shut the door to our cottage. He walked through the kitchen into the sitting room and I followed, pausing for a moment to look at the window seat where I had almost died a few hours before, then jogged to catch up as he started climbing the stairs to the bedrooms.

“Brenner thought that I had enough political clout to be useful as a pawn,” I argued. “If we can convince him to side with us, maybe the council will agree to invade Machturm Castle, especially now that Katharina is apparently leaving the borders of Snowdonia to do as she pleases. Her hatred of them is well known. They will want to defend themselves before something happens.”

I followed as Alaric walked down the narrow upstairs hall and into his room. I leaned against the doorway, watching as he silently paced around, pulling things out at random.

“I truly believe the people of Snowdonia are tired of the way things are there. Some will rise up, but surely the common people are tired. We’ve had so many hard years, I don’t think they’ll fight if they know it’s me. And I don’t *want* to conquer anyone. I just want to get to Machturm Castle and remove the High Inquisitor and Katharina.”

Alaric continued moving around, and my frustration increased with every movement.

“I know I’m not an engaging leader like The Red Rider, but I can use my magic. I’m sure the animals would give us information—a warning if people were moving against us. And the mages in the Dwarven army would have skills to evade the Huntsmen, I’m sure of it.”

Fear competed with certainty of purpose in my heart, and the tension started spilling into my voice. “Even if we lose, even if it’s all for naught, we have to try! You heard the news in the council today. Our entire continent may fall to this new evil, and if Katharina distracts us from fighting it—or worse, aligns herself with it—we’re doomed.”

Alaric turned toward me finally, his expression more serious than I had ever seen it. In two paces, he was in front of me, and he sank to his knees again like he had at Deerbolt.

“Nieve, I have sworn to you several times that I would keep you safe. That vow has no time limit.”

My heart hammered in fear at his next words. *He’s going to try and convince me not to do it. To stay safe instead of doing what’s right.*

“If you want to go, we will have to leave tonight.”

My despair leaped to triumph as I realized he was going to help.

“My heart is breaking,” he drew a sharp breath, grabbing both of my hands in his, “to think that we might be going to our deaths. But I would not be the one to stop you from your purpose. Rather, I will die defending you, and hope it is enough to win the day for you.”

Everything clicked into place in my heart, and for a moment, every fear and doubt, every anxiety for the future, every plan I was making slipped away. There was only me and Alaric and the love between us.

“If I was as brave as you,” I whispered, pulling my hands from his and instead framing his face with them, “I would have told you the truth long ago.”

He said nothing, his eyes wide as I stepped closer to him. “If I had been brave, I would have given you my heart when you first asked for it when we were all but children. I would have run away with you and never regretted it.” I felt Alaric swallow, his jaw moving under my hands and his stubble scratching me as it moved.

“I thought I was doing what was best for you—and I was. But I should have let *you* decide what was best for you. My father... well, he would have been a problem, but we would have found a way.”

A single tear slipped down Alaric’s cheek, and it broke my heart to see. I leaned down, kissing it gently then rubbing it away with my thumb.

“I thought I loved you then, but I didn’t really. That was a pale love, a love made of snowflakes that melted in the light of day. I love you now

with the strength of the sun itself,” I whispered, trying to impart some of the fierceness of my feelings into my voice. “When you agreed to marry me, I despaired at it because I knew you would never leave me, and I would have to live every day hiding my heart from you. But I won’t do that now. You can have it, wholly, and if you want it, keep it. If you don’t...” My chin wobbled, despair at the thought breaking through the certainty I felt in my heart.

Alaric spoke, his voice more unsteady than I had ever heard it. “I’ve loved no one but you—ever. If you love me with the strength of the sun, then I love you with the strength of the night. I want you all to myself, to hide you where no one can take you from me. I want to give you the stars. To make the moon rise only to reflect the light of your heart.” He slid his hand behind my neck, cradling my head as his other hand pressed my waist against his.

My heart tripped and I caught my breath as his lips brushed against mine. Closing my eyes, I melted into his kiss, hardly daring to believe it was real and wanting only to show him how much I loved him.

A cough sounded from behind me, and Alaric moved as fast as lightning, pulling me around behind him and grabbing a knife from somewhere as he faced the intruder.

He relaxed a half a second later, sheathing his knife again and letting go of me. “I thought this cottage was supposed to be warded as long as the doors and windows were shut,” he commented mildly, with just a hint of steel to his voice.

“Yes, to intruders,” Briar Rose answered him impatiently. “But all of those wards were put up when I was living here as a child. They all recognize me as a friend, obviously.” She raised her eyebrows. “Sorry to interrupt, but I thought you’d be a little more focused at the moment. I brought food and my horse, Truesight. He’s a little old, but he’s dependable, and he’ll get you to the Republic a lot sooner. I’ve also begged safe passage papers off of Luca for you, so even if you’re stopped in Charmagne, you won’t be disturbed.”

We both gaped at her in shock. “How did you know we were leaving for the Republic tonight?” I asked finally.

She laughed. “I’m not an idiot. I know you well enough Snow—I mean, Princess Nieve, to know that you won’t let people suffer if you can do

something about it. Besides, I have a feeling that you can do more than anyone else expects. A lot more.”

My heart glowed at her words, and despite my embarrassment at our interrupted kiss, I couldn’t help grinning from ear to ear.

“Thank you Briar. I’ll never forget this.”

She waved off my thanks. “I’ll be waiting down with Truesight. Don’t bother packing food, I’ve got everything you need.”

She tromped down the steps and I turned back to Alaric.

“I’ll just run to my room and pack a few things, and I guess we can leave right away.”

He nodded, then pulled me into another gentle kiss that made my knees weak. His face had a radiant smile on it we pulled apart. “You had better go pack or else we might get too distracted to leave tonight.”

My eyes widened at his teasing and he laughed, pushing me gently toward the door.

In no time at all, we had gathered everything we could need and were seated together on Truesight.

“Raleigh will be at the capitol tomorrow to convince his mother to send you troops. He’s her favorite, so it shouldn’t take long. From what he says, his grandparents will jump at the chance to settle things in Snowdonia. You have friends, Nieve. Ones who believe in you.”

Swallowing back tears at her kindness, I nodded, squeezing Alaric from where I sat behind him to let him know I was ready to leave. With a final wave, we dashed into the night.

Chapter Twenty-One

Alaric

“It’s a good thing Briar got us those safe passage papers,” I grumbled to Nieve, who sat behind me on Truesight, her arms wrapped around my waist. “Your birds attract the wrong sort of notice—and they’re getting worse!”

Nieve giggled as the offending birds twittered even louder than usual. “I think they’re understanding you more now, so you’d better be careful!”

“We’ve been stopped eight times in the last ten days. During our last trip we weren’t stopped once!”

“We were taking better precautions that time. Now we’re lucky enough to be riding a noble steed,” Nieve replied, patting Truesight’s flank.

“Fair enough. But I say that the noblest thing about him is his stoicism in putting up with those birds.”

Nieve laughed, but it was cut short when the birds started chattering and swooping more than ever, their calls shrill and agitated.

A man appeared as if from nowhere. Although I had expected something like that since we were waiting near the hidden waystation, I still tensed in the saddle, making Truesight start forward a little. I pulled him to a stop and focused on the man.

“We’ve come seeking safe passage to Entfessholt as a matter of urgency,” I called, drawing the sign of the most recent passcode I could remember.

The man nodded and beckoned us forward. “Welcome, friends. I can help you across at nightfall. But your horse will have to stay here.”

I felt Nieve tense behind me. “Can someone take care of him until we come back, or arrange for him to be sent home? He belongs to our friend in Spindle.”

The man frowned at Truesight but nodded. “I can care for him, or whoever is manning the station can, at least for a time.”

“Thank you very much,” Nieve said, and the man waved us forward.

In a few steps, we crossed some invisible boundary, and the waystation appeared in front of us. The man, whose name was Friedl, led us to a lean-to at the back of the station, where we slid down from Truesight and made him as comfortable as possible.

In no time at all, we were across the river. The crossing was uneventful, mainly because the Charmagnian border patrol was nowhere in sight. “Their new crown princess has magic, I’ve heard, and she’s been accepted by the Charmagnian royals,” Friedl said, “maybe times are changing.”

To our surprise, Bernadine was waiting for us on the other side of the river.

“We have an alarm system, and I saw it was you,” was all she’d say.

She fairly bristled with anger and didn’t speak another word until we were well out of earshot of Friedl, who turned to take his boat back across the river.

Bernadine led us to three ponies tied to a tree next to the path to Entfesholt, and after we were all mounted, took the lead.

“What, by all the Shepherds and their lost sheep, are the two of you doing back *here*?” she demanded, clearly upset.

Nieve began explaining her plan and reasoning in a halting manner, and I couldn’t help but want to cringe the longer she talked.

Our plan sounded ridiculous. I had executed enough operations in my life to know that ours was worse than a wing and a prayer. *Too many wings, actually.* I glared at Nieve’s birds, but they took no notice of me.

“Well, the first issue with your plan is that Brenner is no longer the leader of Clan Murrisch. The interim chief is out in the mines and we would need a unanimous vote to authorize war. If you’re looking for stealth, you won’t get it. And as ready as Brenner is for war, his second in command is not. So *even if* you could get everyone else to agree, I doubt you would win Clan Murrisch’s vote.”

“So you arrested Brenner for the attempted kidnapping?” I asked Bernadine in surprise.

I had half expected a person in such a high position to get away with what he did, or at least just get a slap on the wrist.

“Sort of. When he admitted to violating the law of hospitality, the binding in the oaths he took as leader of Clan Murrisch marked him as an

oathbreaker. He was sent to jail as punishment.”

“For how long?” Nieve asked, her pony just ahead of mine and keeping pace next to Bernadine’s.

“Forever.”

Nieve gasped, staring at Bernadine. “I’m glad he didn’t escape justice, but that seems overly harsh!”

Bernadine looked at Nieve in confusion. “He’s an oathbreaker. He is not to be trusted, and he went against our most sacred laws. As a leader, that is a double crime. Only the forgiveness of his victim could free him again.”

Nieve went quiet. “And then he would be Clan Leader again?”

“Yes, but only if you forgave him. The broken magic wouldn’t allow it otherwise—it must be made whole again for that to work, don’t worry.”

We traveled in silence for a while before curiosity overcame me. “Will you help us, Bernadine? If we can get the council together for a vote, would you vote to help Nieve?”

Bernadine cast a glance over her shoulder at me, her expression tired. “I’ll call the council together, that’s all I can promise right now.”

“Take me to Brenner first, please,” Nieve interrupted.

Bernadine nodded, but didn’t pry. *Is she going to forgive him? Surely not. What he was going to do was despicable. No, she must have some other scheme.* I just couldn’t think of any that would involve her would-be attacker.

We arrived at Bernadine’s house after midnight, collapsing into our beds and then rising again with the dawn.

“I sent out a message last night. All the clan leaders will be in attendance today except for Clan Murrish. As I said, Jael is in the mines.”

“Thank you so much,” Nieve said, going over to Bernadine and giving the shorter woman a hug. “I know you’re skeptical of me right now,

especially because you put so much effort into getting me to safety. But you're still working to help me. You have a truly good heart, Bernadine."

Bernadine patted her awkwardly on the back, her face beet red. She hid a shy smile as they broke apart. "Let's go," she grunted, turning to lead us on the long switchback road that would lead us to the Hall of Knowledge and Wisdom.

The last time we had taken this path had been just after our hasty wedding, with the threat of more attackers under cover of darkness around every corner. *If there are factions in Murrisch that blame Nieve for Brenner's downfall, they may have gotten wind of her arrival and planned retribution.*

My senses were on high alert as we passed every alleyway or walked under any footbridge, any nook or cranny that could potentially shield an assailant. If there was a threat to Nieve, I wanted to be the one to meet it, not her. *I would feel better if we were in the woods. A city has too much noise that could cover up mischief.*

We made it to the Hall without incident, but I didn't exactly relax. As we approached the main doors, Nieve stopped Bernadine.

"I want to see Brenner right away if that's possible. Can you take me to him?"

Bernadine glanced back at me but I kept my face passive. I didn't think it was a great idea either, but Nieve could make up her own mind.

"Follow me," Bernadine said, and turned to lead us into the cavernous hall.

Shadows clung to the carvings on the chalky cave walls, huddling in every curve and dip to get away from the pale morning light beginning to filter through the skylights. Despite the early hour, people were already at work, bustling across the entry hall to get to offices. We entered a large archway at the back and were met with the smell of bacon and coffee.

"It's the dining hall for Clan Erkenntis," she explained and I nodded.

"They come to eat—wait, you mean they *live* here?!" Nieve exclaimed in delight. I didn't share it.

Why live your lives underground, even in a cave this beautiful, when they have some amazing pine forests just up above? I would never be able to live without the sound of the wind in the trees.

The tinkling of cutlery and sleepy conversations faded as we made our way further into the maze of tunnels. As we descended down a large spiral stairway, the intricacy of the carvings decreased and then stopped altogether by the time we reached the bottom.

A pair of guards sat on stone benches in the antechamber at the bottom of the stairs, one on each side of the narrow room.

“We have come to see the prisoner Brenner.”

The guards looked us over, then the one on the right nodded to me.

“So long as that one removes his weapons, you are free to go in.”

I made no protest, walking over to a table that seemed to be for that purpose and laying my bow and each of my visible knives down in a neat row. The guards didn’t insist on searching me so I was able to keep the couple of knives that were out of sight. *Just in case Brenner gets any ideas.*

The guard on the left pressed his palm to the door, then stood back to let us pass. It closed again with a dull thud, leaving us in a corridor carved in granite, with only lanterns to relieve the dull stone.

With confident steps, Bernadine led us forward, the tread of our boots making muffled thumps on the smooth stone. We passed several doors, none of them guarded, then came to a stop in front of a nondescript door on the right. Like the others, the prisoner’s name, crimes, and sentence had been carved into the door with neat, clean strokes.

“You’re sure you want to do this?” I couldn’t help asking.

“Yes,” Nieve replied, giving me a crooked smile. “If I’m going to confront my stepmother and those of our people who are complicit in her orders, I might as well practice by confronting Brenner.”

My eyebrows lifted in surprise, and I pulled her into a tight side hug, planting a kiss on the top of her head and released her again.

She smiled, then turned toward the door. *I knew she’d have a good reason. She just sees things in a different way.*

Still, as Bernadine opened the door, I silently pushed my way forward, making sure I was the first one into the chamber beyond.

The room was different than I was expecting. Although I didn’t think the Dwarves would use dark, festering cells like some of the ones at Machturn Castle, I did think it would be stark and comfortless. It was plain, but certainly not comfortless.

It was one moderately sized room, except for an open door which led into a privy on one side. A decent-sized bed stood against the same wall, along with a set of shelves that held neat stacks of clothes. At the back of the room was a desk and several crowded bookshelves. There were two plain chairs at a simple wooden table, and a sofa on the far wall.

Brenner sat at the desk at the back, half turned toward the door to see who entered. Feeling comfortable that he was currently no threat, I stepped forward, allowing Nieve and Bernadine to come in as well. As he caught sight of Nieve, Brenner dropped his quill and pushed out of his chair to face us as Bernadine shut the door.

A flash near his collarbone caught my eye. A necklace of brassy pyrite emblazoned with a rune hung on a leather cord.

I pulled Nieve behind me, away from Brenner's sight. "He has an amulet!" I hissed at Bernadine, feeling for the knife I had hidden in my sleeve. She tensed beside me, then relaxed after a second.

"That's his suppressant charm," she explained calmly.

I relaxed too, remembering her words from earlier. "Preventing him from using magic to hurt anyone."

Bernadine shot me a puzzled look. "No, the broken magic of his vows prevents him from using magic at all. The amulet prevents him from suffering the effects of his natural magic."

"What effects?" I asked her, but Brenner answered instead.

"I can scent every rock and mineral in this land from hundreds of feet away. It can be deeply important, but without the ability to use magic, I can't prevent it from quickly overwhelming me, especially in a prison such as this."

Nieve leaned against me for another moment, then moved around to look at the Dwarf in front of us. "Your magic overwhelms you, surrounded as you are by rock and stone," she said.

Brenner's expression was hard to read as he stared at her, his skin seeming to crawl in discomfort. I blinked as I realized that his skin was *actually* crawling. Tiny dark runes streamed just under his skin, marking him with words in the Dwarvish script.

"The words of my broken vows," he said, pushing the sleeves of his shirt up and holding his arms out to see when he noticed my expression. "They

mark my judgment and punishment for all to see. Is that why you have come here, Princess Nieve? To confirm I have received my punishment?”

Nieve stared at the marks in revulsion as they scrolled down his arms, marching across his hands and snaking back up to disappear behind his sleeves again.

Brenner barked a laugh. “You’re disgusted at the sight.” He began rolling his sleeves back down. “As you should be. They’re the marks of a disgusting act, breaking one’s vows. And yet,” he paused as he buttoned his cuffs, then fixed Nieve with a hard stare. “And yet, even now I make no apology for it. Guilt, I admit, yes, but remorse, no.”

My arms jumped as I flexed involuntarily, the urge to silence the pride in his speech getting the better of my long training to remain unmoved until I wanted to move.

“You do not regret attempting to kidnap an innocent and force her into vows not of her choosing?” Bernadine asked with contempt.

Brenner turned his attention to her, anger marking his brow. “I did not *wish* to do those things. But she is not an innocent! She is as guilty as I! She has power—was born into it, yet she does not use it. She runs from those who need her and lets fear drive her forward. She should let those who are strong enough to do what needs done use that power. She should be glad to sacrifice some freedom so that others could *live*.”

He took a breath, reading disgust on our faces. “I would not have forced her to—” he huffed out an irritated breath. “I’m not so much of a monster that I would have forced her into a *real* marriage, one in name only. And once the,” he waved his hands vaguely, “the takeover of Snowdonia was complete, and a new government established, we would have had the marriage annulled and she would have been free to marry her Huntsman there if she so pleased.”

He drew in a deep breath and continued with a mulish face, directing himself at Nieve again. “If you had cooperated, lives could have been saved. You cannot understand what is at stake!”

*Not understand what’s at stake?! **She** is a mage who had to run for her life from certain death in Snowdonia. Of course she knows what’s at stake!* I opened my mouth to berate his audacity, but Nieve silenced me by taking a step toward him.

“You are right,” she said softly, her words ringing silent ripples into the room.

I stared at her in shock, the urge to argue on the tip of my tongue. *Let her speak for herself*, I told myself just in time.

“I am guilty. I have power, though I didn’t see it that way before. People were suffering and I did little to help—I was only aware of it in a vague sense. It wasn’t in front of my face, so it was easy to push aside. And fear has driven many of my steps these last months.”

Nieve’s face was earnest as she spoke, taking another step toward Brenner. “I ran from a ruler who wanted to use my heart to protect her land from others like me— even though I was like a daughter to her. I ran from a ruler who wanted to use my birthright as a weapon to wield, despite the fact that he had offered me refuge. I ran from myself, denying my own name and letting Alaric shield me at the expense of his freedom.”

“I offered it freely,” I said harshly, hating to hear her frame what was between us in that light.

She turned to me with a sweet, confident smile and reached up to cradle my cheek. “I know,” she whispered, “and that’s the magic you have within yourself—the ability to love so sacrificially, your freedom was as nothing.” I relaxed at her words, a glow of pride in my chest as she turned back to Brenner.

She held out her hand to him expectantly, palm up. He held his out more cautiously, suspicion clouding his eyes. Gently, she took it in both of hers, watching as the broken vows trailed across his skin, smoky shadows against his work roughened hands. After a moment, she reached up and tugged off her own necklace, the charm that suppressed her magic.

“You wear your guilt for all to see. I see it, and I offer you this freely—you are forgiven.”

At her words, a flash of golden light pulsed from their joined hands, rushing over them in a swift tide and dissipating as quickly as it came.

In its wake I felt a sharp sweep of anxiety. Now we were in a cell with a powerful mage who was no longer bound from his magic. He had just expressed his contempt for my wife, and his expression was unreadable.

“I have called the council together to ask for their aid in marching against Machturm Castle. I will not allow you to use me as a pawn to reach your

goals, but I would be happy to have you beside me as we seek to end Queen Katharina's reign in Snowdonia."

Brenner's jaw dropped in surprise.

Nieve turned and I tensed. It was the perfect time for Brenner to show his true colors and hurt her. She had only taken a step when Brenner reached out to her, snagging her hand. My knife was out in a flash, but neither of them noticed.

"I had a wife," he said, his voice raw. "She died when we were about your age. Taken by a Charmagnian patrol while out on the water and turned over to the Snowdonian Huntsmen. She was executed for being a mage and a traitor." He swallowed heavily. "I told myself I would have my revenge on Snowdonia, for her and for all the mages like her."

Nieve turned back toward him, letting him cling to her hand. "Snowdonia is just an idea, a collection of people and lands—a boundary on a map. You will never find justice against such a thing. But there is real evil in its heart. March with me to the capitol to remove the queen, and we may prevent others from suffering the fate of your wife."

Brenner fell to his knees in front of Nieve, tears spilling down his face. "She would have hated what I did, what I was going to do to you."

"I hope so," Nieve said with a kind smile, "or else she wouldn't deserve your tears now. But if she were here now, wouldn't she forgive you too?"

Brenner snorted, letting go of Nieve's hands to wipe his eyes. He sat back on his feet and snorted. "She wasn't the forgiving type," he said, drawing a laugh from Bernadine.

"That she wasn't, Brenner," she said, walking over to him and offering her hand to pull him up. "But she did love you. And you probably wouldn't have done it if she was still with us anyway."

Brenner got to his feet and looked at Nieve. "If you are asking me to follow you, I will, with as many of Clan Murrish as will still follow me."

"So you were just bluffing when you said you didn't regret what you did? The vows wouldn't have been whole again if you didn't feel some remorse," Bernadine gestured with a sardonic look at Brenner's unmarked skin.

He gave an embarrassed cough and shrugged.

"I grew up watching courtiers bluff their way through every day I spent at court, so I could read it on you," Nieve said. "Although at Machturm

Castle, they were usually pretending to be kind in order to hide something rotten.”

Brenner barked a laugh. “And I was pretending to be unkind to hide my wounded pride, it’s true.”

Bernadine turned to lead the way out, and Brenner gave me a nod as he passed which I did not return. Nieve may have a heart great enough to forgive him, but I didn’t. I would be watching him like a hawk.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Nieve

My hands felt clammy as I followed Brenner and Bernadine to the Hall of Knowledge, our path going by in a blur. I hadn't known that my confrontation with Brenner would end that way, although I had hoped that he would be repentant and I could find it within myself to forgive him. Alaric still clearly distrusted him, but I thought his contrition was real.

The Rainbow Veil caught my eye as we entered the Hall. It shimmered cheerfully, eternally shifting in a beautiful array of colors. I slowed to a stop behind a large pillar as Brenner and Bernadine continued on. Alaric came up behind me, resting his hands on my shoulders and stooping to press a kiss to my cheek.

"Last time we were here we bound ourselves together as we ran from something. Now we're bound even tighter than before, and we're running toward our future," he whispered in my ear.

I shivered, tension and hope skittering up and down my spine. *We have a lifetime before us—if we can make it through the next few weeks alive.* I spun and pressed a quick kiss to his lips.

"I only wish I had agreed when you first asked me," I whispered.

"Don't," he murmured back. "Although I wish it too, it doesn't matter. And like Bernadine said, if things had been different, we probably wouldn't be here. The more I see you in action, the more I realize that you're just getting started with what you can do."

I warmed at his praise, rising up on tiptoes to steal another kiss before stepping back with a shaky laugh. "As long as you're with me, I feel I can do anything," I admitted shyly, then turned toward the dais where the council members seemed to have congregated.

Apparently, attempting to convince a council of Dwarves to essentially go to war is less intimidating than admitting my true feelings to my husband still. I had always been a little shy, and that hadn't stopped just because it turned out he loved me too.

The clan leaders turned to look at us as we walked up to the dais. Their expressions ranged from welcoming, in Winola's case, to downright hostility in Kiefer's case. Just below the steps up to the dais, Ida and Brenner were arguing heatedly as Bernadine stood off to one side with folded arms.

"...and so just like that, you're reinstated as clan head. The *shame* you brought on our family, but somehow you're allowed to go back to business as usual because she forgave you?! Some people refused treatment from me because they thought I had something to do with the *oathbreaker*!"

"You!" Kiefer snarled, staring daggers at me. "It's your fault we're in this mess to begin with," he said, gesturing at Brenner and Ida.

"I seem to remember it was some of *your* men that carried out Brenner's orders," Cariel boomed out, obviously irritated with his fellow clan leader. "You claim you didn't know about it, and your vows haven't been broken, so I guess that's true, but I consider it to be *your* failing as their leader."

Kiefer opened his mouth to argue but Winola cut over both of them. "It's so good to see you again, Princess Nieve, and of course Huntsman Alaric too! You're both looking well," she called, bouncing on her heels. I managed a small smile back at her, but I was bewildered by the emotional undercurrents in the room. I *never* liked confrontation, and it seemed like the council hadn't come to terms with what Brenner did quite yet.

A staff tapped heavily against the floors, echoing off the cavern walls. We all turned toward Johan, who sat in the middle chair on the dais. "Enough. We are all here, so we can begin." He peered over his spectacles at Ida and Brenner with a repressive look. "As much as I share your sentiment, Ida, it is the law of the vows that Brenner is fully reinstated if he receives true forgiveness from his victim."

Ida threw an angry glance at Brenner but stomped up the stairs to her chair in the dais anyway. Brenner followed quietly but with humble dignity, taking his place with a nod to the others. Bernadine cast an encouraging glance my way as she took her seat and I tried to look confident.

“Now, Bernadine has called this emergency council on your behalf, Princess Nieve. We are satisfied that you know that your attacker was brought to justice, as you have so recently released him from his punishment, as is your right. Please explain what requires such urgent attention.”

I stepped forward, feeling a little awkward to be speaking to them while they were seated above me as I stood on the cavern floor. It made me feel small and insignificant, and the enormity of what I was going to ask weighed on me.

I felt, rather than heard, Alaric step forward too. His presence behind me was a reminder that I was not alone. I had strength to rely on if mine failed.

A tiny acorn of courage, lodged somewhere in my breastbone, compelled me to speak. *Even if this doesn't go how I want it to go, I have to believe that I'll have enough help between Brenner and whatever forces Luca and Raleigh's countries can muster. I have to do this because it's what's right.*

“Tha-ank you for hearing me, especially on such short notice,” I said, wincing as I heard my voice wobble. “I have called you together because I am going to address a grievous wrong, and I am asking that you would help me do so.”

“Brenner's actions against you have already been addressed, as we've said. Why waste more of our time here?” Kiefer cut in.

“I was not speaking of that,” I replied, lifting my chin a little higher. “I am speaking of the reason I fled to your country in the first place—of the great evil in the heart of Snowdonia.”

The council members stirred, and Winola's indulgent smile turned into a worried frown. “They cannot reach you here, dear. Our boundaries have defenses that will not allow them to come for you. We do not have easy lives because of it, but you will be safe!”

“That is precisely it, isn't it? Safety. I thought I was safe in Spindle, but Katharina reached me even there—almost killing me with a spelled object. I thought I was safe here, but echoes of injustice threatened me almost as soon as I arrived. I *thought* I was safe in Snowdonia, loved by my family and allowed to live a quiet life, but that was the biggest betrayal of all.” I drew a deep breath.

“During our time in Spindle, we received word of increasing trouble in Snowdonia, and even worse, an organized threat from the Wasteland.”

Cariel's voice boomed out. "And what does that have to do with us? We are far from the Wasteland, and if you ask me, we should focus on the Republic. All mages who flee from Snowdonia are welcome here, of course. But why should we meddle with affairs outside our border?"

"That kind of thinking was what drove me here, and then to Spindle. Why should I help the mages, when I thought I wasn't one? And when I discovered my magic—why should I run back to certain death, when safety was ahead of me?"

"Because I can," I continued. "I am *able* to stand against wrong. There is no better time than now. There may be no other time that we are able. If the threat from the Wasteland strikes and wins Snowdonia, there may be no turning the tide against it. But I cannot do it alone. Spindle and Charmagne will be sending aid, but I fear if we do not strike now—and strike quickly—we will lose the element of surprise and all will be lost!"

My voice sounded shrill at my last words, echoing unimpressively around the cavern. I took a deep breath and looked for the effect of my words on the face of the Dwarves. My heart stuttered.

"For such an undertaking, we would need to have a vote, and a unanimous decision to march against Snowdonia," Johan announced. "Is there any discussion needed amongst us?"

"Absolutely not," Kiefer said in a surly tone, slouched in his chair. "As Cariel said, what has any of that to do with us? Snowdonia has always persecuted mages and always will. If they have discovered a new way of doing so, then it is no surprise to us." He scoffed. "Besides which, she asks us to go with her, to let *her* lead. She's barely come into her own power, and has no experience in war. She will crumble after the first battle. But it will be *our* people who do the fighting. And her story of the nameless threat in the Wasteland—we have no evidence that she didn't dream it all up."

"I can verify the report of danger from the Wasteland," Alaric rumbled behind me, making Kiefer pause.

"It's all very distressing," Winola interrupted anxiously, "but sending anyone to what may essentially become a war is a weighty decision. One we cannot make on a whim."

A stab of despair twisted my heart. *If even Winola isn't convinced, then I have no chance of success.*

“She speaks the truth,” Brenner boomed out, standing from his chair. “Are we to have it said of the Dwarvish Council that a mere slip of a girl has more foresight and courage than we? Meaning no disrespect, Princess Nieve,” he added with a sheepish glance in my direction.

I managed a pained smile, but could feel the tide of the room turning against me. “So now that her purpose has lined up with yours, of *course* you would back her!” Ida argued, pushing out of her chair and jabbing her finger at him.

Bernadine stood up as well, and all of them started arguing at once, while Johan made feeble attempts to call them back to order as he pounded the dais with his staff.

Their shouts echoed on the cavern walls, assaulting my ears and seeming to amplify rather than die out.

Despair weighed on me before rapidly boiling into anger. *Yes, what I’m asking is huge, and yes, I would have been too scared to do something about it even a few months ago myself. But they are experienced in leading their clans and their people. I was raised as a figurehead. Even I can see that the time is now—why can’t they?!*

Shadows gathered around the edges of my vision as I silently seethed, little dark animal shapes flitting around with whispery scritchies, a familiar phenomenon from when I had my suppression charm off too long in a new place. I brushed it away. When Alaric put a hand on my shoulder in support, I barely noticed, my vision narrowed to the figures in front of me, now gathered in a loose knot around Johan’s chair, one step from a brawl. A burgeoning surety swept over me, confidence that the moment was here to be seized.

“Enough!” I yelled with all my might, and to my surprise, the animal echoes were no longer in my head but screaming in a cacophony all around me, the loudest of which were two fully grown brown bears, one on each side of me, standing on their hind legs.

I stared at them in wide-eyed alarm as the animals’ screams died down, then almost stumbled as a bear cub fell against my leg, tumbling with its brother at my feet. The sight of such innocence in the grave moment we were in brought a smile to my face. I glanced at the bear to my left and reached out in my mind tentatively.

Thank you for your assistance, I said. It leaned forward slightly, snuffling the air between us, before dropping on all four paws.

You are the one who speaks to us, she replied, ignoring her cubs as they now rolled into one of her legs. *We will aid you—and only you, should you need it.*

I am grateful, and I know my friends will be too.

We do not want the gratitude of the other humans. Their desires mean nothing to us, nor do their lives.

The other bear dropped to his paws and walked forward, every step making my blood pound and nerves shred, but I stood as still and respectfully as I could. He was so tall he could almost look me in the eye.

There is word that you seek balance in the north, in the land beside the death lands.

My hands shook at his size and the powerful weight of his voice in my head as I puzzled out his meaning. *The death lands? He must mean the Wasteland. And Snowdonia lies next to it.* I nodded.

I will try, or I will die, I told the bear humbly.

We wish that you would not die. We do not care about the others. Though we wonder why you always travel with that cursed death-bringer.

He swung his head in Alaric's direction, and Alaric had the good sense not to move, although he did tighten his grip on my shoulder. A flutter of worry went through me at the growling animosity in the bear's thoughts about Alaric. I tried to think of a way to explain Alaric that would make sense to such a creature.

He is... he is my mate. He does not kill for pleasure, he kills to eat or to protect.

The female bear swung her head at her mate, and the male looked back at me. *Then he is a balance-bringer. If he is yours, we will respect him too.*

He looked at me thoughtfully for a second, then added, *In the land beside the death lands, it is not right. The air is foul and growing fouler. You should not wait to protect your own.*

I nodded gravely, and both bears turned to look at the Dwarves, now frozen in fear on the dais, surrounded on all sides by a host of animals that was growing larger by the minute. Lizards and moles tumbled over and under foxes and raccoons. Owls winged in the air, narrowly missing support columns and scattering songbirds in their wake.

“The bears say that the time to drive out the evil in Snowdonia has come. Will you go with us?” I asked them, my voice strong.

Surprisingly, it was Johan that first spoke, his voice shaking and thin, but full of awe. “This is a portent worthy of the ballads of the Republic’s founding!” he exclaimed. “The beasts have gathered and asked our help to rid the north of evil. We can not resist such a charge, surely. Let us take a vote.”

I didn’t bother correcting his assumption that the animals were here as supplicants and silently hoped that they didn’t understand and take offense at his meaning either.

“Princess Nieve of Snowdonia has requested our aid in marching north to Machturn Castle to overthrow Queen Katharina and bring Snowdonia into a new age of wisdom. What is your vote?”

A series of “Ayes” followed his question, swiftly and without hesitation. Finally, it was down to the last vote: Kiefer. Unlike the others, he wasn’t overawed with fear. There was a trace of it on his face, but he also looked exhilarated, as if ready to test his strength against such a mob. I waited with bated breath, unsure of what he would say.

“If the Princess can call such an army as this, then I agree with Johan. It is a sign of things to come. I vote yes.”

I dropped my shoulders in relief, leaning back slightly against Alaric’s bulk behind me. The animals roared again in response, the noise thundering around the cavern and knocking loose a shower of dust and dirt. By the time it had stopped falling, most of the animals had disappeared, the last few lumbering out the doors and other bolt holes, their tails swishing out of sight.

“That was, well, that was a *most* impressive display, Princess Nieve.” Johan said, coughing as he brushed some dust off of his sleeves. “I must insist that we record your experience of it in our archives, if you please.”

“Of course,” I replied, a little dizzy from everything that had happened. “I would be happy to.”

The others filed out, nodding respectfully to me and largely still speechless. Johan was the last, apart from Bernadine, who waited by the door for us.

“Give us a minute,” Alaric told her, and she stepped outside. As he turned back to me, I practically fell into his arms.

“I can’t believe that happened!” I gasped, then coughed as I inhaled some of the dust still swirling in the air.

He laughed, half choking as well. “Like I said earlier, I think you’re just getting started!”

We awoke the next morning in Bernadine’s house to an unnatural amount of activity for the normally quiet abode.

“They’re preparing to march,” she explained as we ate breakfast together downstairs. “I’ve recalled as many of my spies as I can, but there are a number that I simply cannot reach, either because they’re too far undercover, or they’re too far away.”

I nodded and listened quietly while she and Alaric discussed logistics for the campaign ahead of us. The only useful skill I had was in making and reading maps, but as important as that could be during a journey, it wouldn’t help conquer towns. My best contribution would be staying alive until I could confront my family. What I would say to them, I still had no idea.

We spent the day in meetings with various clan heads and their advisors, planning our routes to Machturm Castle and discussing strategy. I felt empowered afterward, having been able to contribute my skills in projecting the best routes for each of our forces to take, and I left the meeting slightly less overwhelmed than I had felt going into it.

Just after lunch we received two pieces of news that cemented our plans to leave the next day. First, riders from Charmagne and Spindle arrived to inform me and the Dwarven Republic that they were both sending support in the form of soldiers who should be arriving in Snowdonia in a few days. I knew that their courts viewed me and the Dwarven Republic favorably, although in Charmagne’s case it was a recent development and was probably down to Ella and Luca’s friendship, but it was a relief to have a firm commitment and a timeframe.

The second news was much less happy. Bernadine listened to the rider, one of her clansmen that had been undercover in Snowdonia, then dismissed him and reported to the rest of us.

“A group of mages was discovered in the capitol and is being sent to the front with the Wasteland—twelve in all and none with fighting magic.” Dismayed murmurs went around the room. I sat back in my chair as my heart broke for them.

“That’s not all,” Bernadine continued. “They were a sewing circle, most of them elderly housewives whose magic is suited for domestic work. They were discovered using magic to stretch their stash of fabric to create clothes for the orphanage in their town.”

My heart cracked even further. *How can my stepmother—and worse, my brother—be doing such a thing? I’m desperately hoping Barrett doesn’t know what’s going on, but he’s almost sixteen—the age of apprenticeship. He should be helping make decisions by now.*

“This only reaffirms our need for speed,” Brenner said, and Cariel grunted in agreement.

I turned to Alaric. “Will we be in time to save those women?” I couldn’t bear the thought that other mages would be lost before we could get there.

He looked at me with trepidation in his eyes. “We’ll need to fly like your dratted songbirds, Nieve, but we just might be able to do it.”

Chapter Twenty-Three

Alaric

The first push into Snowdonia was entirely uneventful. Although Brenner and Kiefer, who were in charge of the mission, had decided to spread our forces over what I considered a dangerously broad area, we encountered only one town. We approached it close to dusk, but there was almost no resistance. The townsfolk there seemed resigned after the initial fear wore off. I recognized the looks on their faces. The same looks townspeople wore whenever I had ridden into town as a Royal Huntsman. Unresisting and detached, as if they were simply enduring until whatever business had brought me and my fellow Huntsmen into their sphere would take us out of it again. The only item of note in that first town was a frayed copy of a “Wanted” poster. It had Arden’s face on it, and a reward for his capture, for treason to the throne. Hope I hadn’t even dared entertain began to take root. Maybe he made it out before the queen discovered his betrayal.

The next day we encountered several larger towns, with enough men of fighting age to make a stand once they understood what was happening. As I stayed back from most of the fighting, guarding Nieve and the healers that had come along to support the fighters, I didn’t see much of what was going on.

“Have the animals told you anything?” I asked Nieve, who was sitting with her back against a tree, eyes closed and concentrating. She opened them and smiled, making my heart trip over itself.

“Yes. The last fighter was subdued. They’ve actually been helping in the last two towns. The animals, that is. Between seeing magic used for the first time in their lives as well as a hoard of predators streaming into town to assist the mages, even the fiercest fighters seem to have realized it was futile.”

I nodded, impressed, then ducked as one of her birds swooped at me. “Cursed things,” I muttered under my breath.

“Don’t!” Nieve protested and I stared at her in consternation. “They only do it because they like you,” she insisted. I shook my head.

“It’s true! But they don’t want to like you, so instead they make sure *you* don’t like *them*.”

I grumbled under my breath but tried my best not to swat at them for the rest of the day.

At Brenner’s suggestion, Nieve led the band of healers into each town as we pressed forward, encouraging the few that had wounds to be seen to, and answering questions and assuring people that we came in peace and for the betterment of all of Snowdonia.

On the fourth day, several Charmagnian units caught up with us, and soon after their arrival, Ella made her way over to us, a broad smile on her face.

“Snow! I mean, Princess Nieve,” she corrected herself, but Nieve waved it away.

“Call me Snow if you like. I don’t mind at all.” She gave the Charmagnian princess a hug as Ella caught us up on the news.

“We arrived with four units, and Luca’s father agreed to send more if we need it. Prince Raleigh was commissioned to lead the Spindalian forces, and they took a route through Pelerin so they could come to Machturm Castle from the north.”

I drew in a slow breath, relief loosening the small knot in my chest. Tactically we were gaining strength. We had allies. We weren’t in this alone. *This may work after all.*

“I’m so glad you’re here. Will you be staying with us or are you taking your soldiers somewhere else?”

“Luca said we’re supplementing yours, as we don’t really have any mages with us. Just me and Alessia, really. The rest are soldiers - none of whom have magic. So we’ll be staying with you.”

Nieve perked up at the news and I had to smile. “Alessia is here too? Really?”

Ella laughed. “Yes, she’s one of Luca’s personal guards, so she’s down there with him,” she replied, tipping her chin down a slight hill where Brenner was in discussion with Prince Luca.

We moved swiftly after our reinforcements arrived. Town after town fell with little resistance. The people were often frightened, but then relieved and amazed at how well the mages treated them. I listened as Nieve spoke with villagers in each town, hearing stories of family members who didn't even know they had magic or didn't have magic but were accused of it, who were taken and sent to the Wasteland. *No wonder they aren't resisting. They have less to fear from us than from our own government.*

Finally, on the seventh day, we arrived outside Machturn Castle, Prince Raleigh's forces arriving at the same time, having been coordinated between a mage in our group and one in his. We had enough soldiers to make taking the seemingly impenetrable castle possible, but it wasn't going to be easy.

To our surprise, we were met at the gates by a royal messenger.

"Her Highness, Queen Katharina, Dowager Queen and Queen Regent for her son, King Barrett, bids you parley. She seeks redress of the grievous wrongs that have been committed unto this sovereign nation, and would readily welcome her stepdaughter, Princess Nieve, and whomever is leading this expedition to attend her at their leisure."

After much debate, it was decided that along with me, of course, Ella, Luca, and a dozen mage warriors would accompany Nieve to the throne room. Neither Kiefer nor Brenner desired to go.

"It's sure to be a trap," Kiefer said, arms folded and looking irritated after a long argument about the parley with Prince Luca.

"The second I see her, I'll kill her, and then I'll be an oathbreaker all over again," Brenner said simply, and the two agreed to take over leadership of the combined forces instead, along with Prince Raleigh, while the rest of us went inside.

After a lull while our acceptance of the parley and the size of our party was communicated, we prepared to enter, carrying swords and knives, as agreed upon, but no bows. I stayed at Nieve's back as we walked through the familiar halls, a strange sensation in our new role as conquerors. Finally we arrived at the audience chamber.

"Are you ready?" I whispered as we stood waiting for the doors to be opened.

She nodded, swallowing hard, then with visible effort, tamped down the fear on her face.

“I’ll be with you the whole time,” I assured her. Then the doors creaked open.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Nieve

As the doors opened, I half expected a flight of arrows to stream out, striking us down where we stood, or a squad of Huntsmen to attack as we stepped forward. Instead, it was only the usual gloom and shadows of the tower room, lit by a crackling fireplace and two enormous candelabras flanking the throne.

I followed Ella and Luca into the room, and Alaric stayed behind me, surrounding me with support. *But soon I'll need to face her. It must be me.*

"It was folly to think that a pack of sun-addled vipers would honor their agreements with us. Betrayers," Queen Katharina hissed, her glance pure venom as she stared angrily at Ella and Luca. Luca's face was dark, but Ella merely blinked, seemingly unruffled. *I wish I had a little of her steady confidence.*

As we walked further into the room, I could see the dais a little more clearly. Queen Katharina sat on the gilded throne, her hands gripping the arms tightly. She was dressed in all black, her face stark and bloodless above the high neck of her gown. She wore a sunburst crown on her head, embellished with rubies. The spikes were more like sharp teeth than rays of the sun, the rubies like drops of blood. Her sons stood on either side, in matching blue doublets and hose, their faces strained. Behind Barrett lurked the High Inquisitor, shrouded in robes, his bone-white hand resting on Barrett's shoulder. *Is Barrett under his thrall too? Or is he here by threat?*

"We have come to support our friend, Princess Nieve, in addressing charges so grave, that—" Luca cut off abruptly as Queen Katharina laughed, the sound slightly unhinged.

"Silence, fool. Your concerns are not mine. Let me see my stepdaughter. My business is with her."

I hesitated a moment. *Am I strong enough to face her?* My racing heart and weak knees said no. Ella looked back over her shoulder at me, her eyes full of understanding. I took a breath. *I'm not strong enough, but with my friends here and Alaric close by, we're strong enough together, for this at least.*

As I stepped forward, Ella and Luca stepped apart, allowing me to pass through them. A part of my mind registered Alaric stepping forward in tandem with me, still at my back. "I am here, stepmother," I said simply, looking up at her.

"*You!*" she spat, her expression hot. Her hands gripped the arms of her throne like claws.

But it shouldn't even be her throne. It should be Barrett's by now. I glanced at my brother, still wondering whose side he was on, but all I could discern was a tempered anxiety as the High Inquisitor clutched his shoulder.

"I was told long ago that you would come to me this way if I didn't deal with you. A vengeful fury, intent on your brother's throne. The evil in your heart has corrupted ancient allies into betraying us, not to mention reducing my best Huntsman to a begging slave at your feet."

My fear flipped to white-hot indignation at the disparagement of my friends, but as I opened my mouth to respond, I heard Alaric snort behind me.

His amusement stopped me in my tracks, and I relaxed. *There's no need to get sucked into her anger.*

"I was shown it all, but instead of dealing with you, I didn't listen. I always treated you like a beloved daughter. Now you come, attacking my people and threatening violence!"

The injustice of her words was frustrating, but I focused on the real issues at hand. "Why are you slaughtering innocents—your own people! For no other reason than they were born different? How could you allow it?!" I asked in anguish, looking over at Barrett.

"You would feel that way, given your own proclivities," Katharina spat, her face contorted in disgust. "Even so, I tried to protect you. In kindness, I rejected the sage advice I was given and tried to find a cure for you, day in and day out for *years!*"

The High Inquisitor shifted where he stood, his robes rustling. Barrett winced, and I wondered if the Inquisitor was hurting him, but Barrett gave

no other sign, merely shot a look over to Koen, who was watching their mother with a frown.

The Queen continued, talking mostly to herself. “But I ran out of time. I could wait no longer. The evil in you was getting stronger. I couldn’t allow you to live and destroy my son’s future. Even then I gave the order to eliminate your threat with sorrow.” She shot a venomous look at Alaric behind me, but didn’t address him.

A thrill of anger danced along my skin at that look and the mention of my attempted murder. *What sort of kindness is that?* Outrage mixed with regret as I couldn’t help remembering flashes of laughter and friendship I had shared with my stepmother years ago before my father died.

She is unrecognizable now. Instead of that intelligent, friendly person I had known, she was now sunken and coiled tightly. A deep well of fear and darkness seemed to hang around her like a cloud, and her eyes burned.

She drew in a long breath, closing her eyes and gathering up her bitter thoughts. When she opened her eyes back up, her gaze was quieter, and she leaned forward in her chair.

I like this sudden self-control even less than her anger.

“Despite all of that, the situation I find myself in has obviously changed. What was foretold has come to pass, and we must come to some sort of resolution, you and I.”

If I was an experienced statesman like the many nobles in the Machturn court, I would no doubt have had a subtle plan to enact, ensnaring the Queen in my stratagems and drawing her into a favorable conclusion.

Instead I simply relied on what I knew best. Honesty. “Yes. I am here for a resolution as well. Will you renounce your regency over Barrett’s throne and submit to true judgment for crimes against your people?”

The Queen sat frozen for a moment, then stretched her lips into an insincere smile. “You show how naive you are, stepdaughter, with an opening like that. It appears I have neglected your education. Let me rectify it now.”

She picked something small up from her lap and stood, motioning me forward as she descended the short stairs from her dais, her dress trailing behind her like a dark spirit.

Reluctantly, I took a few steps forward, Alaric behind me, and made sure to stay out of arm's reach.

“In a negotiation such as this, it behooves each party to offer a gift to demonstrate their intentions and good will,” the Queen said as she held out her hands.

In them lay a small red object. For a quick, horrible moment, my eyes played tricks on me and I thought it was a heart—my heart—still and bloody.

I blinked and the image changed. It was an apple. One of *my* apples, from Asylbrunn. I recognized it by the deep dull red color and irregular shape.

How did she get that? Has she hurt Agatha? The thought squeezed my heart and I glanced up, my eyes flying around the audience chamber to see if my nurse was there. But the only ones here were a set of royal guards standing against the walls and my own party of allies and soldiers. My eyes darted to my brother. Koen was watching the scene with a wrinkled brow, but Barrett stared at me with wide eyes. He flicked his head back and forth in an almost imperceptible “no” before wincing away from the High Inquisitor’s touch.

My eyes flew back to the apple in Katharina’s cupped hands. *Something’s wrong with it.* I glanced at Katharina’s face, and behind the manufactured smile, I read fear and desperation. *The apple is a trap somehow.* I flipped through possibilities rapidly, trying to understand how. *Poison?*

I reached out with my still fledgling magic, testing the object as Violet had begun teaching me. There was a wrongness to it, a strident scent that Violet had mentioned when discussing poison.

“You fear my offering?” Katharina asked. “With what is between us, I suppose I cannot blame you.” She gave a breathy laugh. “I will prove my goodwill.”

In a flash, she lifted the apple to her mouth with one hand and took a bite. I stared in dread, wondering if the poison I had read in the apple would make her suffer. *Could she not know it was poisoned?*

I glanced at Barrett. He didn’t look surprised, just worried. *So it wasn’t him. Or this is part of the trap somehow.* I flicked my eyes toward the High Inquisitor, hidden as always in his voluminous robes. Not for the first time, I shied away from him. He had a wrongness about him that felt rotten and sickly sweet. The stench of it hung over the room.

Swallowing heavily, I reached back out to the apple with my fumbling magic, focusing on the more immediate problem.

“There. I have eaten some. Now prove your intentions are true by eating of the same apple.” Her words wrapped around me, carefully calculated from years of understanding who I was to prick at every notion I held dear: cooperation, goodness, compliance. .

I batted down the feeling of obligation her words produced, focusing instead on the apple in her hand.

...if she doesn't take it you will pay. Your sons will pay. Queen Katharina flinched slightly and my eyes flew to her. Was that voice speaking to her? There were no animals in the room, save a few insects that were easy to block out, but it had certainly been a scrap of an animal's thought that I had heard and that Katharina reacted to. I glanced around, reaching out with my natural magic, which was much stronger than my other abilities, to find the source of that voice.

Katharina held the apple out between us, and with my mind half on searching for the voice, half on understanding the trap laid for me, I took it. Alaric shifted at my back but didn't stop me.

I stared at the apple, now in my hand. My physical connection helped my magic as it probed the wrongness within it. There wasn't just poison, there was a spell. The flavor of it in my mind was rotten and vaguely sweet, reminiscent of something. I stretched outward in my mind, following tendrils of magic and seeking its source, which seemed to be somewhere in this room.

They extended toward the dais, and a flicker in the mirror caught my eye. *Is it the mirror?* I pushed my untrained magic further, trying to see if I felt a response, though, since it was an object made by humans, it wouldn't be capable of being the source of the spell. *Maybe it's spelled as well and used by a mage to channel magic into the apple.* As I brushed against the mirror, I recoiled.

There was something there, yes. Something powerful that I didn't understand. But it had a completely different flavor to the magic in the apple. Instead of sickening sweet, the mirror felt deep and horrible, like a sulphur flame flickering in a marble tomb.

Keeping away from the strange mirror, I caught a tendril of the magic I was searching for, and in a flash, I found the source. It took every ounce of control I had not to betray myself. *The High Inquisitor.*

We had suspected him of having magic, and sure enough, it was his spell, his particular brand of magic I was sensing in the apple. I reached out, understanding making the picture easier to see in my mind. Although dampened somehow and only detectable now that I had heard his voice, his magic was strong, and it webbed out over the entire room, the strongest connections to the apple in my hand and to my stepmother in front of me.

I looked up at her, and she stared at the apple expectantly, just a hint of color on her cheeks. As I probed as quietly as I could at the magic I had discovered, the creature's voice from earlier brushed against my mind, muffled but clear enough. *If she doesn't take it, I will kill them all before they have a chance to run free, but I will kill you and your whelps too. I do not wish to rule over a throne, but I will do it to cleanse your country of the evil within it.*

I hesitated, my breathing turning shallow as I tried to figure out what to do. Now that I had identified his power, the High Inquisitor's magic felt immense—aggressive and powerful.

He'll be able to make good on his promise. We have enough mages in the room that we could probably overcome him before he could kill us all, but he would certainly have time to kill my brothers and probably several more of us too.

If I ate the apple, I would certainly die of the poison and be subjected to the spell embedded within it as well. If I rejected the apple, the High Inquisitor would act before I could warn the others, and everyone I loved here would die. I wrinkled my brow as I stared at the deadly fruit, trying desperately to think of a solution that wouldn't lead to everyone dying.

Lilac's words from a magic lesson came back to me. After discussing the theory that magic was essentially connection, I had asked whether black magic was then disconnection.

"That's part of it, yes," she had replied. "The result of black magic is disconnection: interrupted unity. But the actual magic itself is still based on connections. Instead of wholesome connections, ones created with the true nature of an object or spell in mind or the consent of another mage or person, black magic is a forced connection. It goes against a spell's true nature, forcing a person or an object to be subject to the mage's will. The connection is there, but it is wrong, and the result is destruction."

I could feel the connection of the High Inquisitor's spells on the apple and my stepmother, just as I could feel his voice in my head, a sort of creature speech. *But why can I hear him when I can't hear any of the other people here?* I had tried during my lessons with Lilac, but we had determined that my ability extended only to animals. *He couldn't be—is he an animal?*

The High Inquisitor's head snapped to me, hidden in the folds of his cloak, and with a stab of fear, I realized he had heard my thoughts too, just like the other animals did.

I felt him gathering his power, readying himself to strike a fearsome blow. I had no battle magic, nor training to fight with a sword. My best magic was my creature magic, and it could not stop the power building within the enemy.

I opened my mouth to scream, knowing that by the time I got the words of warning out, it would be too late, but a sudden reckless thought struck me. The spelled apple in my hand fairly blazed with connection to him. *Can I use that to get to him, destroy his black magic and maybe free my stepmother?* With a swift motion, I brought the apple to my mouth and bit deeply.

"No!" I heard Alaric bellow. The apple tasted rotten, as if it had turned long ago. It fell from my nerveless hand as a nauseating river of vinegary sweetness rushed through my limbs.

I sank to my knees under the weight of it, feeling strong arms catch me just as I found a thread of magic under the poison, tingling like lightning. I seized it, pulling my whole being into it with all my might, and raced along the path toward its source.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Alaric

Nieve lay limp in my arms, her pale skin growing paler still by the minute. Her breaths were coming quick and shallow. Ella dropped to her knees beside me, taking Nieve's hand in hers and closing her eyes.

Everything exploded around us, the singing of blades being drawn mingled with rushing feet and yells. Above it all rose a deep, unhinged laugh.

My eyes were drawn to Queen Katharina, who had fallen to her knees as well, a crazed look in her eyes as she watched the scene unfold before. "Finally I'm free of you!" she crowed to Nieve.

Rage filled my vision. *She did this! She must reverse it, or pay!* Only Nieve, heavy in my arms, prevented me from striking the queen down as she laughed.

A blur of blue bolted toward us, and I pulled a knife from my hip to defend against attack. Nieve's brother, King Barrett, stumbled down the stairs toward us, having escaped the clutches of the black swathed High Inquisitor somehow.

He'll try to finish her off, I thought, assessing this new threat. Before I could move, Queen Katharina caught hold of his doublet.

"Don't touch her," she ordered, her face drawn with fear and spite again. "She's only getting what she deserves. You'll be safe once she's dead!"

King Barrett turned back to her, his face high in color. "I haven't been safe since she left, and probably since before then as well. She's my *sister!*" He pried her hands off of his clothes and started forward, only for her to catch him again.

"No! I will *not* have you ruin my plans. I have sacrificed *everything* for you. She must die or you will not be King."

Prince Koen ran up, and between him and his brother, they pushed the queen back, who stumbled against the dais as two of her guards rushed up to her.

Both boys turned and charged over to us, and I tensed, half expecting them to attack. Instead, they dropped to their knees beside Nieve, King Barrett wiping tears out of his eyes.

“Why did she eat it?! I told her not to. I know she saw me shake my head!”

I stared at him. “Do you know what’s in the apple? Tell us, quick!” I urged. “One of the mages here may be able to save her!”

He glanced at his brother. “She only said she would rid us of Nieve once and for all after she tricked Nieve into eating the apple. The High Inquisitor told her to take one bite herself, on the safe side, and then make sure Nieve bit into the poisoned side.”

Prince Koen nodded. “Maybe if we get her to spit out the bite she took, it would help?”

I looked at Ella, whose eyes were open again. She nodded at Prince Koen’s words.. “The poison or whatever it is has already spread through her body as far as I can tell. But maybe if we get the source of it out, Nieve could fight it off?”

I pulled Nieve up until she was sitting forward, letting her lean across my shoulder as her brother slapped her back. Nothing happened except that Nieve seemed to be getting colder in my arms. Despair threatened to overwhelm my heart, and I looked at Ella again.

She stared back, her expression desperate. “My sister might be able to help with poison—she took a class at the Academy!”

She called out for her sister as I cradled Nieve in my arms, pressing a kiss to her forehead. *Wake up*, I willed her, wishing I could somehow call her back to me and settling her back into my arms.

Alessia made her way to our little group, ducking out of a semi-circle of mages and soldiers that had been formed around us as more Snowdonian Huntsmen swarmed into the room. After a quick explanation from Ella, she laid a hand on Nieve’s heart, reaching out with her magic.

After a minute she pulled away, staring at Nieve in confusion. “I don’t know what’s wrong. I released her from the poison, but there’s still

something there—some magic that is consuming her from the inside out. It's like nothing I've ever encountered."

She cast a glance around the room, and her gaze settled on the High Inquisitor, kneeling in a puddle of black robes beside the throne, his bony hands clutching at his head. The air rippled around him, and I squinted to see what it was.

The Queen shrieked as Luca and his knights pressed forward, engaging the guards protecting her. She slipped behind the throne, sticking close to the Inquisitor, her eyes wide and dark with terror.

I looked back at Nieve, so still, and my heart stuttered. Cradling her close, I pressed kisses to her face. Somewhere under my ribs, a shining thread of awareness of her flickered, thin and fading. "Don't leave," I whispered, burying my face in her hair. "I'm right here. Wake up."

Dimly, I heard Alessia speaking. "I'm sure it's that man over there. But I can't feel any magic in him, can you?"

"No—not really, but I think I could try my natural magic on him, see if it would reveal whether he's a mage or not."

"Do it. I'll see if I can fight through those guards and attack that shield he has up. If it is him, he'll be distracted enough by the two of us that maybe it will free Nieve."

My head whipped up just in time to see Alessia sneak over to Luca, relaying her plan as Ella stood and stretched her hands out to the High Inquisitor. My arms tightened on Nieve. *Hold on. Help is coming.*

Alessia started her charge as Ella whispered under her breath. I blinked as ghostly flames appeared over her head, not quite visible, but flickering on the edge of my vision when I looked her way. I glanced back at the High Inquisitor and almost gasped.

No longer hunched, he was halfway raised up, contorting back and forth and writhing in pain. As I watched, his hands seemed to shiver and shake, the bones moving under his skin as hair sprouted along his knuckles. Ghostly flames flickered above his head as well, and he clawed at himself as if trying to get away from something inside him. As he did, his hood fell down, and the whole room slowed to stare at the sight.

The black robes that had so long hidden his face under the guise of piety now revealed a monstrous sight. The face was hardly reminiscent of a man, its nose and mouth vaguely canine in shape. Fanglike teeth stuck out of his

mouth haphazardly, and, as we watched, bristling, mangy white fur erupted in patches across his skin.

“He’s a Beast!” I shouted, and the noise seemed to break him free of Ella’s magic.

He snapped his teeth, almost howling as he cast a glance around the room. Dropping his magical shield in an instant, he turned away, grabbing the trembling queen and dragging her with him toward the dark burnished gold mirror that hung behind her throne.

As we all watched, he took two steps and walked right into it, stooping to fit under the frame and stepping forward as if it were a doorway. The queen’s wailing snapped off suddenly as she was dragged through, and the mirror’s gray-bronze surface heaved, rippling outward and then freezing, the ripples gathering back toward the center. The edges of the frame seemed to crumple, pulling inward as the entire mirror folded in on itself. Before anyone could move, the entire thing disappeared, trailing a shrinking shadow in its wake.

I glanced down at Nieve with a spark of hope in my chest that was quickly extinguished.

She was lifeless.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Nieve

Straining, although I had no body, and therefore no muscles—nothing solid to strain against, and nothing solid to fight with, I tangled with the creature's mind.

A presence pressed against me, its intent seeping into my mind somehow. It was searching for a way to break me, hurt me, and then use me and my magic in some way I couldn't understand.

I had no time to be afraid, knowing that so long as I distracted him, he wouldn't be able to hurt those I loved.

Who are you?! I demanded, sinking my magic into every surface of the other's mind and trying to find a way in, trying to understand him. I could feel my life slipping away through the spell's connection with my body.

Who are you to ask me that? A growling, snarling voice full of anger filled my mind. *I have existed longer than you could imagine. I have endured what you could not understand.*

Its voice was howling now, vibrating with rage that I didn't dare touch. *My essence has been ripped apart for answers, mended together with human after human: never enough, never quite right, always existing and never dying. And now, a child like you dares ask who I am?!*

I cowered under its fury but kept searching for access to its power. *I can use our connection to stop its magic.* I didn't know how, but I knew I would figure it out if I had enough time.

You'll never find it, the animal said. From the way it growled its consonants, the image of a dog popped into my mind. But it didn't sound like any dog I had ever spoken with.

A sense of bitter laughter spilled against my mind. *No, I am no longer like a dog.* There was a note of sorrow in its voice that cracked my heart,

even as I knew this being was determined to kill me.

Who did this to you? I couldn't help asking.

She *did*, came the response, full of hatred. *The deathless one. The Queen. Queen Katharina?* I asked, confused.

I felt the animal's attention fracture, and I tensed for whatever had distracted him. Although I could feel its magic still working through me, stifling my life, a golden thread flickered through my connection to my body with a warmth like a promise, sustaining me as the temptation to give in to the darkness pulled at every fiber of awareness.

A sudden howl lifted up from the creature, bouncing off the walls of my mind with deafening weight. I felt a loosening, and then suddenly the creature was gone—disappeared as if it had never existed, and I was falling.

I came back to myself gradually, soaking in the words Alaric whispered to me before pressing a soft kiss to my lips. I kissed back, pulling him down more securely and then frowning in confusion as he pulled back.

"Nieve?!" he gasped, his tone distressed.

"Were you expecting someone else?" I asked grumpily, then flushed bright red as I realized we were surrounded by people, all watching us with varying levels of amusement—except my two brothers. They looked faintly disgusted.

"No, I—Nieve, I thought you were dead!"

My eyes snapped back to Alaric, and I struggled out of his arms into a sitting position. "I'm okay," I assured him, pressing a kiss to his cheek and twining his fingers in mine. "I'm alright."

He heaved a sigh, then got to his feet, pulling me along with him, retaining a hold on my hand.

"The High Inquisitor was a Beast," I told him, glancing at Ella and Luca as well. They nodded.

"We saw him before they escaped," Alaric added.

"Escaped?" I looked around the audience chamber but didn't see either the Inquisitor or the Queen.

"Yes," Alaric said, tipping his head toward the throne. "I wouldn't believe it if I hadn't seen it with my own eyes, but the Beast grabbed the Queen and dragged her into the mirror, which sort of collapsed on itself and disappeared."

I blinked rapidly, trying to understand what he was saying. “The mirror... disappeared?”

He nodded. “I know. It sounds impossible.”

“Well, it seems to be a day for the impossible, because I spoke to the Beast.” The others gasped as I continued on. “From what he said, he used to be a, well, some sort of dog—but has been undone and somehow melded with humans so many times, he doesn’t seem very doglike anymore. I didn’t know such a thing was possible.” A tear slipped down my face. “He said the Queen did it to him, but he called her the ‘deathless one’. That doesn’t make any sense.”

We stared at each other until someone cleared their throat. Barrett stepped forward, a serious look on his face.

“I don’t know about any of that, but I wanted to say, we can probably arrange a crowning ceremony in a few days, although all of the nobles may not be present.”

I wrinkled my nose. “Why? You were crowned after Father’s death. Just because you’ll be ruling on your own now doesn’t mean you have to be crowned again.”

He stared at me. “You won. You’ve taken my throne.” He gestured around at the mages and soldiers with me and a group of royal guards, each of whom had been bound and shackled and herded off to one side.

Understanding dawned. *Queen Katharina was obsessed with the idea that I wanted to rule. She must have told him that.* I shook my head, repelled at the thought. “I have no desire to be queen. I never have. It would crush me.”

Walking over, I took his hand in mine and looked directly into his eyes. *How is he as tall as me already?!*

“Will you be a good king to all your subjects? Mage and non-mage?” I asked. He nodded, watching me warily. “And would you consider a treaty with the Dwarven Republic?”

He frowned, and I squeezed his hand. “Yes, I know that an assassin from that country killed father, but it was not ordered by the council, and the people I have met there mostly don’t want to hurt Snowdonia. Father himself always said our duty was to do what was best for our people, no matter how we feel about it. A treaty with the Republic would be best for both our peoples.”

He stared at me for a moment, and Koen came up next to him. “Listen to her, Barrett. You could be the king that saw peace between our countries.”

I blinked at my littlest brother. *How does he have the wisdom of a man already?!* These boys were growing up faster than I could comprehend.

“A treaty takes two sides,” Barrett said, but he took a deep breath and drew himself up, “but I vow that I will do my best to create peace and possibly friendship between our two countries.”

I smiled, tears gathering in my eyes. “Then you will be a good king, Barrett, and I will live my days as the wife of a Huntsman.”

My brothers’ eyebrows flew up and I laughed, reaching back and pulling Alaric forward. “We were married soon after I fled,” I explained, twining my hand in Alaric’s again. “As it turns out, I’m well suited to life in a cottage in the woods.”

Alaric nodded to my brothers, then smiled down at me. “I’ve tried not to say it this whole time but, *I told you so.*”

I snorted, then broke into peals of laughter, the boys giving us a strange look as Alaric joined in. I pulled them both into a hug. My heart felt whole, and my arms were full. *All my loved ones are safe, and whatever the future brings, we’ll face it together.*

Epilogue

The paper crinkled as Briar Rose set Raleigh's letter down on the nearby writing desk in her room.

"They've done it!" she exclaimed into her empty bedroom, then winced and pressed the heel of her hand into her forehead.

Muttering a spell to dampen the pain, she walked over to one of the shelves on the wall and took down a painted box. Although the spell should make the pain disappear for the rest of the day, Briar Rose had always had difficulty getting her magic to obey her—at least in comparison to the other mages that had made their way through Deerbolt Academy over the years.

"Most of them have been royals with magic pedigrees longer than my arm, though," she muttered as she pulled a packet of herbal tea out of the box. "Maybe commoners like me generally have a more difficult time of it."

Putting the painted box back up on the shelf, she put the tea sachet in her pocket. Once her spell started wearing off, she could run to the kitchen and brew the herbal potion with some hot water.

It was the second time this week she had gotten a migraine. They were getting worse. *Should I tell my godmothers?*

After a moment Briar Rose, tapped her pocket decisively. *This will do the trick*, she thought. *It's probably just the stress of everything happening with Nieve and the Council.*

After all, migraines were a small problem compared to the battle Raleigh had written about in his letter. Or the federation of countries that the Headmistresses were helping create. Or even the lost Duchess of the North that was hidden away as a baby from the threat of the Sleep Fairy. *Imagine growing up with the weight of your mother's prediction of your death. And I'm complaining of a headache.*

The ridiculousness of it all made Briar Rose smile, which only widened as she caught sight of her reflection. She had pulled her hair back with a ribbon today, but as usual, little ringlets around her face had escaped and

were now sticking out in a frizzy halo around her head. She took a moment to smooth them back, then inspected her work in the mirror.

Her smile drooped to a frown as she watched her blue eyes flicker to violet, then back to blue again. She blinked several times, but it didn't happen again.

"Just a trick of the light," she told her reflection. In the mirror, she caught sight of the beginning of a dress on a dress form over her shoulder, and spun around to look at it, her sunny smile returning once again.

Her godmothers were making a dress for her twenty-first birthday, which would arrive before long. Usually, the three of them got along very well, but after starting the dress, they had begun arguing about the color: pink, blue, or purple.

Briar Rose was rooting for purple, but she had a feeling that Gladiolus would win out with her favorite color, blue. Whichever color it was, Raleigh was sure to tease her about how she looked in it even as he made her promise to give him a dance on her birthday party, which coincided with the Founding Day ball.

"Since they're making it with magic, they could always change the color later," Briar Rose snorted, tugging on the sleeve of the pattern that was currently draped over the form. "I wonder what making a dress is like for non-mages?"

Nieve had made a very simple one earlier this summer but had told Briar about observing women in her country of Snowdonia using spinning wheels to create thread, which they used to weave cloth and then make the entire garment from scratch.

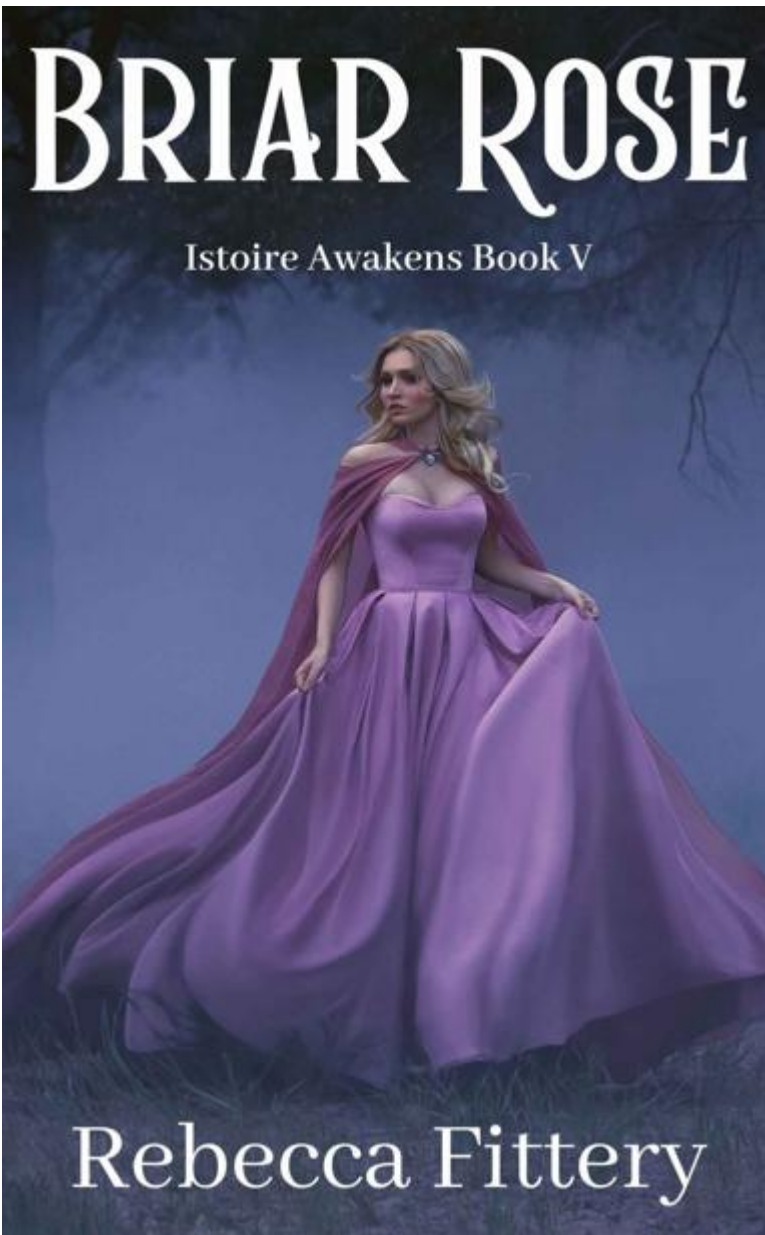
An image of a sharp spindle on a spinning wheel flashed into her mind, dark pointed iron with a jeweled disk on one end, glittering maliciously. She shuddered, dropping the sleeve on the dress form and pushing open the door of her bedroom.

The best cure for an overactive imagination is sunlight. Or hard work. I could go muck out the stalls, I suppose. The image faded as Briar Rose jogged down the stairs, whistling a tune that sang of the sea.

Next Book In The Series

Available for pre-order now!

[Briar Rose: A Retelling of Sleeping Beauty \(Istoire Awakens Book 5\)](#)



Deerbald Academy was founded to bring the ruling families of Istoire together. After years of hard work, its purpose is finally being achieved, but with a threat gathering in the Wasteland to the north, it may be too late.

BRIAR ROSE: The Headmistresses of Deerbald Academy took me in when I was a baby: giving me a family, a home, and opportunities I never would have had otherwise. My friends have started graduating and going off to do great things, but instead of starting great things myself, I seem to be losing control. My migraines are getting stronger, my magic is getting weaker, and the future I thought I was building at the Academy feels like it's slipping

away. I'm supposed to be an adult now, but instead of knowing what to do, I think I'm losing my mind. The only constant has been my best friend, Prince Raleigh. He wants me to come back with him to the capitol after he graduates, but I'm not exactly princess material, and I never envisioned leaving my home in the ancient forest. Does he really love me, or does he just not want to lose his best friend?

RALEIGH: As fourth child to the crown prince of Spindle the weight of ruling won't ever fall on my shoulders, but it doesn't mean I don't have royal duties. One of those duties sent me to Deerbolt Academy to ensure it became a success and to make friendships with other royals. I've spent the last four years and more happily fulfilling those tasks. As graduation approaches, I've started to realize my devotion over the years wasn't dedication to the mission, it was dedication to someone—my best friend, Briar Rose. What I feel for her isn't just friendship, it's steadfast, wholehearted love. But there are mysteries swirling at the Academy, and the more I dig, the more it seems like Briar Rose is at the center of them. Until we figure out why, she won't even think of a future with me as anything more than a friend.

On the night of her twenty-first birthday, Briar Rose's questions are answered, and her world shattered. She's left with a clear plan that could save the continent, but the only person who believes her is Raleigh. Can they find a way to fulfill Briar Rose's vision despite the prophecy foretold at her birth? And will the feelings growing between them make them stronger, or ruin their friendship forever?

Briar Rose is a clean fantasy-romance retelling of the classic fairytale, *Sleeping Beauty*. It is the fifth book in the *Istoire Awakens* series, and although it can be read as a standalone, is better enjoyed when read as part of the series.

Books By This Author

[Belle & Beast: A Retelling of Beauty and the Beast \(Istoire Awakens Book I\)](#)



A war hero. A prince with a secret. A distressed damsel intent on beating the odds. They're not the fairytale characters you're used to. BELLE: My family lost everything at the start of the Beast War. I've been waiting on my hero fiancé to come home so I can gain back what's mine. Just as the war is ending, a mysterious Prince threatens ruin not just for me, but my fiancé and our whole town too. Everything I've worked for has been destroyed, but I may know a way to bargain with this monster...

ANDRUS: I've dealt with the threat Lord Montanarte presented neatly. Now his daughter is here, complicating things with a deal I can't refuse. What began as a problem may end up strengthening my crown ... but the way her eyes haunt my dreams could be my undoing.

EDDIE: It's been a bitter struggle to drive the Beasts from our northern border. Victory secured, I'm heading home to my fiancé. But home doesn't feel like the same place I left five years ago, and the person I thought I knew best is turning out to be a stranger. Have I left a war only to enter the fight of my life?

Belle & Beast is a clean, fantasy-romance retelling of the French fairytale, Beauty & the Beast. It is the first book in the Istoire Awakens series, but can be enjoyed as a standalone.

[The Red Rider: A Retelling of Little Red Riding Hood \(Istoire Awakens Book 2\)](#)



The day Red walked through the woods to meet her grandmother was the day her childhood ended. But she's not a little girl anymore.

RED: I not only survived the revolution, I thrived. I'm now sister to the Duke and Duchess of Sherwood, Captain of an elite border unit, and revered by the people as The Red Rider - the one who turned the tide from the dark days of civil war. But even though I've conquered the monsters of my past, shadows have started creeping into my present. It's getting harder to tell whether my worst enemy is the Beasts we fight in the Wasteland, or the horrors still in my head. When I'm tasked with guarding a tight-laced Pelerine soldier, his contempt for me and my country makes me want to

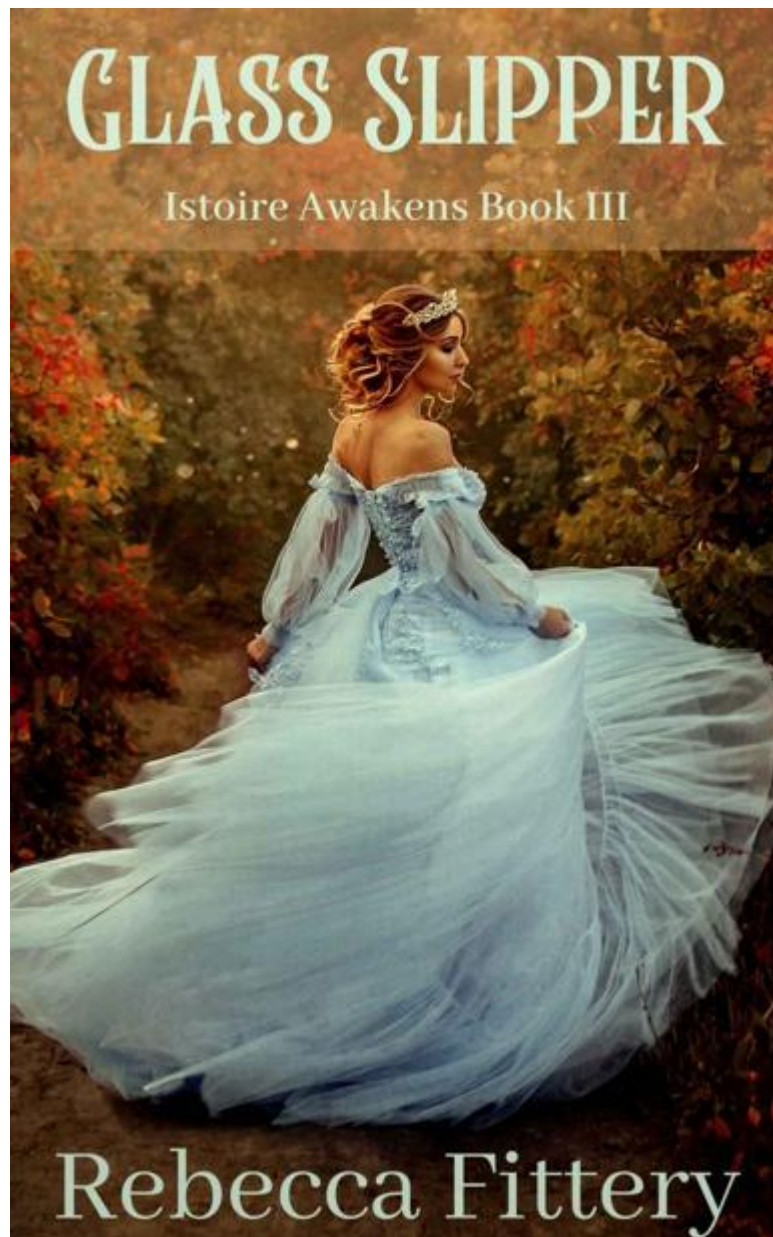
shove his ignorance in his face. But as we start to become friends, I find myself relying on him more and more.

EDDIE: I woke up to a brutal reality after the Battle of Asileboix. Alone and wounded in a potentially hostile territory, I'm at the mercy of the intriguing and dangerous Captain Hood. She's everything I should hate, but I can't deny that I'm drawn to her. We're bound together for now, and sparks are flying as we force each other to confront our demons. It's hard for me to admit, but I'm hoping one of those sparks catches and ignites something powerful.

When Red is called upon to right the wrong of her only failure, Eddie turns out to be the one person who can stand by her side through it.... if they can trust each other first.

The Red Rider is a clean fantasy-romance retelling of the French fairytale, Little Red Riding Hood. It is the second book in the Ivoire Awakens series, and although it can be read as a standalone, is better enjoyed when read as part of the series.

[Glass Slipper: A Retelling of Cinderella \(Ivoire Awakens Book 3\)](#)



Growing up in the midst of tragedy and triumph, Ella knows better than anyone that what's inside a person counts more than their appearance. Even so, a pretty dress and a pair of oddly beautiful glass slippers change her life more than she ever imagined.

ELLA: Ever since my father died, I've been so busy running my ancestral estate and caring for my family that I haven't had time for romance. But a chance meeting during a visit to my stepsister has me re-thinking whether I have room in my future for love. Every time I'm with Luca, I'm convinced

we can take on any challenge life throws our way. And it's getting hard to ignore the way he makes my heart beat faster.

LUCA: I've always believed that love at first sight is real. What else would explain why the strange girl I met before my coronation ball has never left my (or heart) over the last decade? I've finally found her again, and she's even more beautiful than I remember - inside and out. I'm convinced she's the one I need by my side, and I know I can make her happy too. The only problem? She doesn't know I'm the crown prince, and she's not exactly the person my parents have in mind as our next queen.

A pair of glass dancing slippers seal Ella's fate with her true love, but the very magic that tests their hearts and binds them together drives a wedge between them; and reveals a talent Ella never wanted.

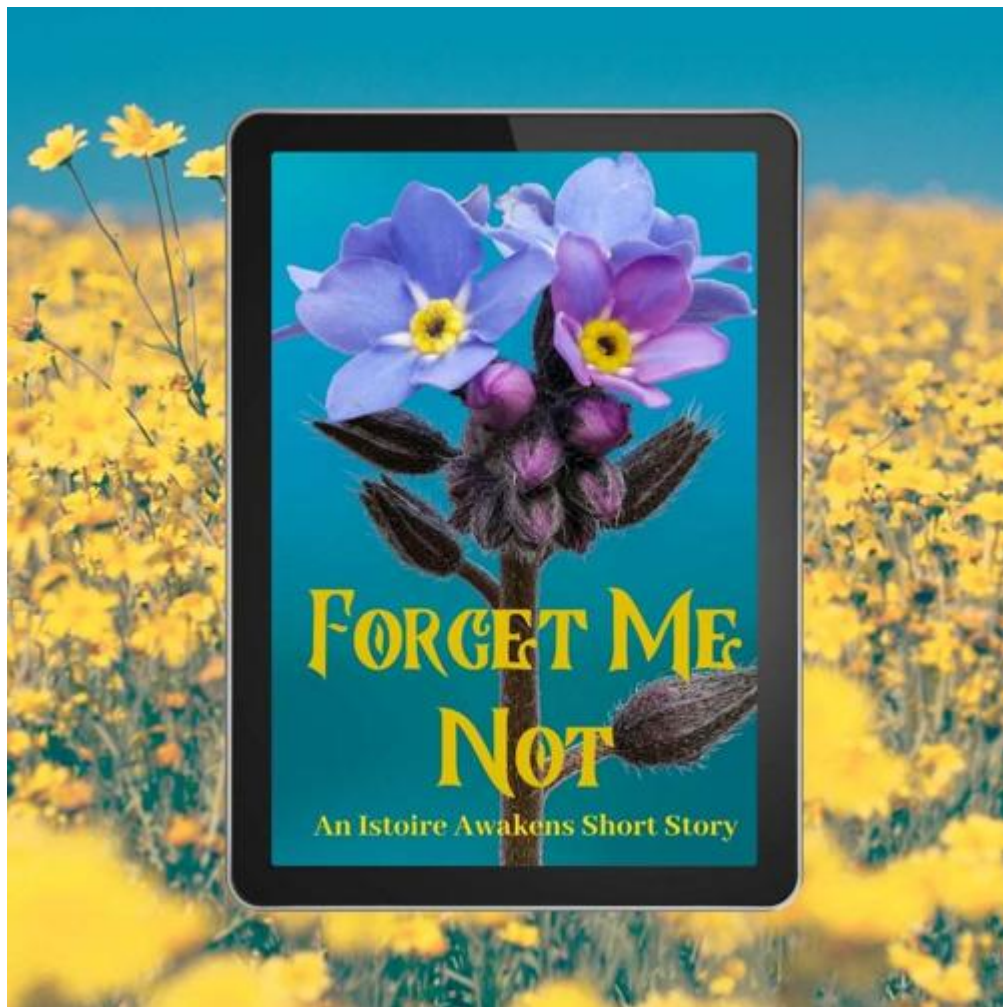
When events in Charmagne reach a tipping point, will Ella and her Prince find a way to lead their country, and each other, into the future together? Or will their splintered relationship fracture the kingdom and continent beyond repair?

Glass Slipper is a clean fantasy-romance retelling of the classic fairytale, Cinderella. It is the third book in the Istoire Awakens series, and although it can be read as a standalone, is better enjoyed when read as part of the series.

Connect With Me

For a free novelette, and a peek into the Istoire Awakens world, sign up for my newsletter at:

<https://www.rebeccafittery.com/newsletter-and-free-short-story>.



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Acknowledgements

*"Friendship is born at that moment when one person says to another,
'What! You too? I thought I was the only one.'" - C.S. Lewis*

It's been exactly one year since I published my first book! That miracle has only been possible with the support of a growing community. It's been a privilege to discover so many other people who love creating worlds, or who just love my worlds enough to help me create them. Every time I meet someone who is one of my "people", I'm always reminded of the quote above by C.S. Lewis - "You too? I thought I was the only one!".

My proofreader, Katherine Nadene, has been such a big help since we started working together. You've helped me push my writing forward so much! I'm so grateful.

To the Foehn Wind Writers - you guys rock. Our meetings fill the well, feed the soul, and as always, your critique makes me a better writer.

To the Hope*Writer community, thank you for being a space where writers can grow, and for your invaluable support and feedback. I love sharing a seat at the table with all of you!

Steve and the kids, and all my family - you're saints. Thank you for making space for my writing, and cheering so loudly.

And to you dear reader - thank you for reading my words! It means so much to me that you spent some of the precious minutes of your life in Istoire. I hope you enjoyed the adventure, and I'll see you in the next book!

About The Author

Rebecca Fittery

Rebecca writes clean, new adult fairytale romance in a world of magic and mystery. Everyone who deserves a happy ending gets one, and even those who don't deserve one have a chance. Whether they take it or not is up to them!

She currently lives in the wilds of rural Pennsylvania with her husband, their pint sized princess and prince, and an orange tiger cat. When she's not writing, her days are spent exploring with her kids in the woods behind their house. So far they've found a fairy circle, a witch's cottage, and several perfect climbing trees.